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HALO OF SPEARS
THE GOLDEN GEYSER
LIVE FROM THE DEVIL
FOR BETTER FOR WORSE

Juvenile

THEY RODE THE FRONTIER
HIS KINGDOM FOR A HORSE
FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION
GREAT TRAINS OF THE WORLD

HALO OF SPEARS

Wyatt Blassingame

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
1962

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FIRST EDITION

To my daughter Peggy Diamant
with love

Who would remember Helen's face
Lacking the terrible halo of spears?
Who formed Christ but Herod and Caesar,
The cruel and bloody victories of Caesar?
Violence, the bloody sire of all the world's values.

Robinson Jeffers, "The Bloody Sire"

CHAPTER 1

The office of the Pine County jail was on the second floor of the courthouse. It was a large room, pine-floored, furnished with a roll-top desk, a cot, a table, five chairs, and two spittoons. Each day a Negro prisoner would sweep out the big middle, but it had been a long time since the last scrubbing; even the signs of poor marksmanship around the spittoons showed the patina of age along with splotches of fresh dampness, and Howard Cason, who liked all things clean and orderly, was uncomfortably aware of this. From where he stood, a little stiff in his lawyer's black suit and derby, he could see through an open window into the branches of a live oak, heavily hung with Spanish moss. To his right was the door that led downstairs to the courthouse. The door at the other end of the room was barred.

Cason glanced toward the barred door, then back to the jailer. "I haven't seen the prisoner yet. I can't be sure he's the man I represent."

"But if he is?"

There were three of them in the office: Cason, the jailer, and a man Cason did not know. It was this man who asked the question. Cason looked at him, and said with something more than legal caution, "May I ask your connection with the case?"

The jailer answered. "This here's Ryan Durrance, Mr. Cason. Ryan's woods captain for the Ivy Naval Stores Company. That's the company got the contract with the state to lease convicts. If that fellow back yonder goes to the chain-

gang—and damned if it don't look like that's where he wants to go, unless he talks hisself into being hanged—then more'n likely Ryan is the one will have to work him."

Cason said, "I see," and there was a sudden sourness in his mouth.

"You might say I'm just curious," Durrance said. He was in his thirties, tall, solid without being bulky, black-haired. His skin was darkly sunburned but with an undertone of malaria that made it the color of a new saddle, and against this his eyes were a curious, intense blue. There was a scar at the left corner of the mouth, but it had healed well and did not distort the face. On the whole it was a rather handsome face; yet Howard Cason looked at him and looked away again with a vague sense of being repelled. Perhaps, he thought, it was the nature of Durrance's work, which he despised, or perhaps because the little and ring fingers on the man's left hand were missing. Cason had always been sensitive to any type of deformity.

To the jailer Cason said, "I'd like to see the prisoner. There's no need of wasting more time unless he is my client." They crossed to the barred door and when it was open Cason said, "Alone, if I may." Over the jailer's shoulder he could see Durrance watching them. The scar bent the corner of his mouth slightly upward as if he were smiling.

"The last cell on the left," the jailer said. "Maybe you can get something out of him. We aint been able to."

There were six cells, three on each side with an alley between them. In the first, on the right, there were four Negroes, all hunkered down on their heels in the middle of the floor playing cards. As Cason passed they looked up and grinned. "Howdy, boss."

"Hello," Cason said, without stopping.

Three cells were empty. In the last cell on the right a white man was apparently sleeping off a drunk. In the cell on the left David Mayfield sat on the bunk. He sat with his forearms resting on his thighs, hands folded, his head bent slightly for-

ward above them. He had not shaved for over a week. His beard, like his hair, was red, though here, with the only light coming through a small barred window, it seemed almost black. For a moment Howard Cason thought he was asleep; then he noticed his eyes were open, looking at nothing.

Cason said, "Hello, David."

"Hello, Howard."

"You don't seem very surprised to see me. Or overjoyed, for that matter."

"I heard your voice."

"I see." He stood there, one hand on the barred door, wishing suddenly he had not come, had not let Elton Marshall talk him into taking the case. ("It's like betting on a team you hate to see win," Marshall had said. "If it does win, at least you win the bet. And if it loses, you're happy. If you get David out, you've won your case and obligated him to you. If you don't, we have the satisfaction of seeing him where we both know he should have been a long time ago.") Only I'd feel better if I'd just stayed away, Cason thought now. And said aloud, "Your Cousin Elton hired me to help you."

"Thanks. I don't need any help."

"You have a lawyer here?"

"No."

"They haven't let you see one?"

"I haven't asked."

"You haven't asked? Why?" The man on the bunk did not answer, and after a long moment Cason said, "Tell me what happened, David. I don't know anything really, except the charge."

"I'm guilty."

"Wait. You mean——"

"I killed her."

"Wait!" Cason said again, more sharply now. "I told you: I don't know anything. When Joe came home he talked only to your father and mother. Apparently they didn't take time to

talk to anyone, explain anything. They jumped in a buggy and set out for town, for the train, and——” He stopped. He was conscious of the iron bar under his hand, the feel of grime and rust. I don’t hate him this much, he thought. I couldn’t. I shouldn’t have come. And said aloud, “You know about them, David? The train——”

“Joe told me.”

“So Joe came back here. We wondered.” And then, “I want to express my sympathy about your parents, David. I—the whole county was terribly shocked. They were beloved people.”

“Yes,” Mayfield said. He did not look up.

Somewhere under the eaves of the jail sparrows made cheeping noises. From the other direction came the voices of the Negro prisoners, as soft as running water. Cason moved his hands upon the iron bars. “So all we know, David, is what your mother’s house servants had overheard. It took awhile even to find out where you were. There was the confusion over the name you had given.” Again he stopped. “Why did you do that, David?”

“I thought it might save Miss Clara and Father some disgrace.” There was no emotion in his voice, only a numbness. “They were still alive then. Or I thought they were.”

“I see,” Cason said again, and thought, How old is he? Twenty-eight, twenty-nine? And the first time in his life he ever tried to save anyone anything is after they’re dead, killed trying to get him out of another scrape. The thought brought back some of the old bitterness and made him feel better. He said, “So you will have to tell me your side of the story, David, before I can even try to help.”

“I told you.” David Mayfield turned, looking straight at the lawyer for the first time. “Thanks, Howard, but I don’t need help. I don’t want it. They are charging me with one murder. They should charge me with three: my father and mother and——”

“You didn’t kill them!”

"Not technically. But you think I did. It's in your face now." His voice was quite steady, almost impersonal. "So I'm going to take what I've got coming. It's about time, don't you think?"

Now it was the lawyer who was slow in answering; and Mayfield said, his voice still quiet, detached almost, "Not because of Father and Miss Clara. Or not that alone. I had already decided before that. You see, I loved her."

"What?" the lawyer said. "Who? You can't mean . . . She was the wife of a moonshiner. A—a . . ." His hands began to shake as they gripped the bars. "What about Laura? What am I going to tell her? With the engagement already announced and the wedding——"

"You don't need to tell her. Unless there comes a time when you think best, for your sake or hers." The prisoner stood up. "I thank you for coming, Howard. And thank Cousin Elton for me. I know how he feels about me personally, and that this is for the family's sake, not mine. But tell him I'll keep quiet as possible, not to embarrass him." He turned then and went to stand before the small, high, barred window, his back to the lawyer.

It was the gesture, the absolute dismissal that angered Cason. "All right," he said, "if that's the way you want it." But halfway down the hall he stopped. He was breathing hard. Crazy, he thought. He's always been crazy. Only . . . Then he was back at the door again, holding it again with both hands, saying, "Listen, David, I don't like you. I've never liked you; I've never forgiven you, for a lot of things. Maybe that's the reason your Cousin Elton asked me to come here; the reason I let him talk me into it: to turn the knife a little. But I've got to warn you, if it's just for my own sake, so I can go home and live with myself."

The sound of his breathing was quite audible. He said again, "Listen, David. They may not hang you. In this county they probably won't. But they'll send you to the chaingang, to the turpentine camps. And it won't matter then who you were back

home. You'll wish they had hanged you. You don't know about that. Your family's worked convict labor; but you never bothered to go into the woods and watch. You don't know. Get a lawyer, David. A local Florida man, but——"

The man at the window had not moved. "All right," Cason said. "I tried. You're off my conscience."

"Well," the jailer said, "sounds like he's your man all right. Only he don't seem to want to talk to you no more'n to the rest of us."

"Yes," Cason said. He was aware of Ryan Durrance watching him. "I'll leave my card with the sheriff in case he"—he nodded very slightly toward the barred door and the cells beyond—"changes his mind."

He circled the stained floor near the spittoon. He went down the stair. The lower floor of the courthouse was newly remodeled, the wide halls marble-paved. The sheriff's office was on the left, the sheriff a short, heavy-set, square-faced man. "He's got a right to a lawyer anytime he wants one," he told Cason. "But there's no law says we can force one on him. And so far he aint said anything except 'I done it.'"

"Who was she?"

"I told you. The wife of a four-bit moonshiner down near New River Swamp. A man named Tom Mawson. From what I hear she was sort of half-witted, but damn good looking. Probably your client—you say his real name is Mayfield?—went over to buy some liquor and got a look at her and started sneaking around the back door. Anyway, it seems certain now they'd been chummy for quite awhile."

"Did her husband, Mawson, know about it?"

"He says not. He says if he had, he'd of killed both of them quite a while back. And, from what I know of him, he probably would have. But he says this particular night when he came

home and she wasn't there he thought she was out looking for a cow they'd lost. About the time he started to get worried these other fellows showed up to tell him his wife had been killed."

"Who were they?"

"Local men, four of them. They were coming home from a hunt when they saw the light at the camp. They hadn't known anybody was there this time of year and decided to stop by on the chance of getting a drink. A couple of them knew old Mr. John Ellis. They say that when they were still a hundred yards away they could hear a fight going on: a woman yelling something about she was pregnant and he was going to have to look after her."

"Pregnant?" Cason said.

"That's the way they heard her. Anyway, these fellows decided they better just tend to their own business and get on home. Then there was the shot, and somebody started yelling over by the creek. They figured from the sound that it was a nigger and they better investigate. But what they found was this fellow Mayfield standing over the dead woman, drunk as a whole herd of goats and saying, 'I killed her.'"

"But nobody saw the actual shooting? It could have been an accident, or even her husband?"

"I reckon it could have, except for what your friend says. 'I done it.'"

"I see," Cason said, and thought with that part of his mind that was always completely legal, that operated automatically as a lawyer's, If he had only kept quiet, since the husband is a moonshiner, an outlaw . . . And thought, Only I'm not his lawyer. If he wants to go to the chaingang, let him go. He's had it coming. Only he doesn't know, doesn't realize . . .

The sheriff was saying, "About this nigger. Joe, he says his name is."

"Joe Booker? His family sort of belongs to the Mayfield family."

"What do you want me to do with him? He keeps hanging around the jail like a dog outside a saloon waiting for his owner to get drunk and thrown out. I run him off and he comes right back. I'd lock him up, only it seems like that's what he wants, to get inside with this other fellow."

"I'll talk to him. Where——?"

"Around on the back steps. If he aint, it's the first time in a week."

"All right," Cason said.

But as he came out of the courthouse Joe Booker was on the front steps, waiting, a lean, black man neither young nor old, wearing overalls and a blue shirt, his cap in his hand. He said, "Hello, Mr. Howard. You got him out?"

"He doesn't want me to help him. I can't help him if he doesn't want me to."

"Is he still drunk?"

"Drunk? In the jail?"

"I reckon not. They let me see him twice, and he wasn't drinking then. But he was still in that spell."

"Spell?" Cason said. He had a curious sense of merely parroted words, as though his mind was too numb for thought. "What do you mean?"

"Like he is sometimes when he's sobering up, where he don't talk to nobody, not even me. I reckon you aint been around him much like that. But I never seen one of them last this long. It's near two weeks, Mr. Howard."

"He was drunk when it happened?"

For a moment the Negro's gaze wavered, looking down at the cap in his hands, and Cason thought, He's trying to decide where I stand, what to tell me, the truth or a lie, whatever will help David most. And I won't know which it is, lie or truth, only what it was meant to do. Aloud he said, "Mr. Elton Marshall sent me to get David out of jail and to bring him home, if I could. Or at least get him out of jail. For the sake of his

mother and Miss Laura if no one else. But if I am going to help, I need to know the truth."

"Yessir. I was going to tell you the truth. When Mr. David told me we was coming down here to the camp he said it was so he could get drunk. But I guess he was already drinking. He had a bottle on the train coming down here. And we was out at the camp for five days."

"So he'd been drunk eight days, a week anyway. And buying it after he got here from Tom Mawson, the one whose wife . . . ?"

Again the Negro's gaze bent downward to the cap in his hand. "He went there one time and got a gallon. Said it was enough to hold him, he wouldn't need no more for a while."

"It was also enough to let the woman know he was back at the camp?"

The Negro did not answer. They were still standing on the courthouse steps. It was December, the north Florida sunlight colorless as spring water, seeming to submerge them like water, a world without motion, until suddenly a flock of sparrows descended from one of the oaks to the courthouse lawn. Howard Cason said, "Where were you when it—the shooting—happened?"

"I was running a trotline us set that afternoon, before"—he hesitated—"before that woman come to the camp."

"You knew she was there then?"

"Yessir. When I heard the shot I started to call Mr. David. There wasn't no answer so I started to run. When I got to camp I found Mr. David with all them other men standing around."

"Did you hear Mr. David say then he had killed her? Did he admit it?"

The Negro looked straight at him, the corneas of his eyes white as buttermilk around the dark pupils; and Howard Cason thought, Like an eagle; as if he, his whole race, had an extra eyelid they can lower and through which they can see you with-

out being seen. "No sir," the Negro said. "I didn't hear nothing."

"All right." Cason moved, and stopped. "I have to go back home. I'll talk to Mr. Elton Marshall. I—Mr. David can get in touch with either of us anytime he wants. Or he can get a lawyer here, if he wishes. His Cousin Elton will send money anytime."

"Yessir."

Again he moved, and stopped. "Do you want to come home with me, Joe?"

"Thank you, sir. I better stay here and look after Mr. David."

"Look after him? They are already looking after him, in there." He could feel the old anger turn like fever inside him. But he said, "Do you need any money?"

"It aint never hurt to have a couple of dollars. Mr. David might need something, and I could get it for him."

Cason gave him the money. I'll add it to my bill, he thought. Charge it to Elton. Let his blood kin pay for it. I don't owe David anything. And thought, I shouldn't have come. I should never have come.

The small, barred window of David Mayfield's cell was at shoulder height. Through it Mayfield watched Howard Cason cross the courthouse square toward the town's one hotel. He'll get the afternoon train home, he thought, and quit watching. His hands rested lightly on the windowsill, his face raised slightly to look into the branches of the nearby oak. Through its leaves the sunlight came in little trickles; it splashed silently on leaves and Spanish moss and trickled off into shadow, while from out of sight on the courthouse roof sparrows kept up a senseless and persistent twittering.

So all I have to do now is wait, Mayfield thought, his hands light on the windowsill. Because I killed her, he thought. Because I was a coward. I couldn't accept simple goodness, had

seen too little of it, let myself believe in too little of it to recognize it when I found it. To me she was just another man's wife in my bed, a well to forget in, a different kind of bottle to reach for and drown in, stop thinking in: to stop thinking forever maybe, though I was afraid to face that too. But to her it was merely right to give pleasure; wrong was to deny it. It was that simple, and I killed it.

Sparrows whirled from the roof into the tree, bodiless as shadows. So all I have to do now is wait, he thought, though he did not say, even to himself, what it was he waited for. He merely stood with his hands light upon the windowsill. He was like a man who has known for a long time that he had cancer and refused to admit it, but now at last is in the operating room, the anesthesia already taking hold, the surgeon ready, and the future no longer in his own hands; nothing to do now but watch the anesthetized, impersonal, fragmentary thoughts that twittered across his mind like the chirping of sparrows, and wait.

CHAPTER 2

It was exactly noon when Ryan Durrance left the courthouse. He turned right along the two blocks of board sidewalk on which most of the town's stores fronted. Beyond these there was neither paving nor sidewalk, but the houses were set well back from the street, large, two-storied mostly, comfortable though not pretentious. Durrance's home was beyond these, at the edge of the town. It was a one-story frame building slightly in need of paint. There were two oaks in the yard and under them a small forest of camellias, carefully tended with some just coming into bloom. Durrance passed through them without noticing, circled the house, and went up the back steps.

The well adjoined the back porch. He drew a bucket of fresh water, poured some into a washpan, took off his coat. The gun was visible then, an old .32 caliber Forehand and Woodberry, worn butt forward on his left hip. He put it on the bench beside his coat, rolled his sleeves, washed his face and hands, and went into the house.

His wife was at the kitchen stove, a thin woman not yet thirty but with a tracing of lines about her eyes and throat that made her look older. Her long hair, piled on the back of her neck, had lost the buttercup-yellow luster of a few years before. It was more colorless now than blond. Yet when she smiled there was still a real freshness about her eyes and mouth. She said, "You're right on time, Mr. Durrance. And your dinner's waiting."

He did not answer. It was not intended as rudeness, and not taken as such. He had never had any store of small talk, even when they had been courting ten years before. He crossed to the kitchen table beside which Ellie, the baby, already waited in a high chair, and sat down and began to put food on his plate: fried steak, creamed potatoes, collard greens, blackeyed peas, cornbread. His wife brought a deep-dish apple pie.

"Seems almost strange having you home for dinner in the middle of the week, with the boys off to school."

He had begun to eat, steadily, without haste, the handsome slightly malaria-tinted face bent above his plate. "That Alabama lawyer was there all right," he said, still eating. "But the only thing that fellow would tell him is what he's already told the rest of us: 'I did it,' and 'I don't want any help.'"

"So that's all you learned?" Rose Durrance asked. "He didn't say anything about why he did it?"

"He was drunk," Durrance said. "We already knew that. The curious thing is he acts like he still was drunk." He spoke slowly, thoughtful, his jaws working steadily at the food. "What I can't understand is why he doesn't want bail, doesn't want to get out. It's almost as if he wanted to go to the chain-gang, was just waiting for it."

Rose Durrance fed the baby two spoonfuls of creamed potatoes from her own plate. "What I can't understand," she said, "is why you're so worried about him. Ever since they brought him in, since that first time you saw him, he's all you talk about. Last month when you had the chills and fever so bad you ought never to have got out of bed, you said you couldn't stay away from work. But today, just because this fellow's lawyer was in town——"

"I'm not worried about him," Durrance said. "It's just that——" He stopped, unable to finish the sentence, and after that first instant making no effort. The answer would come to him eventually, or it wouldn't. He was not a man to worry about his own motives, or even be aware of them in most cases.

Now he finished his meal and stood up. "I better get on out to camp, sugar. I got to make up this morning's work, so I better stay over tonight. I'll be back tomorrow evening." He kissed her. "You and the boys'll be all right."

"Of course, Mr. Durrance." She used the "Mr." as a kind of affectionate joke, but it was one she alone understood. He had been born without a sense of humor in the same way some men are born color-blind.

On the back porch he put on his gun, the black alpaca coat, the wide-brimmed hat that he had first started to wear six years before when appointed town marshal. He said, "Hand me Black Annie, will you, sugar."

The leather strap, three inches wide, three feet long, almost the thickness of a shoe sole and fastened to a short wooden handle, hung coiled on a nail beside her shoulder. She gave it to him. He said again, "I'll be back tomorrow evening," and kissed her again and went down the steps toward the barn where his horse was stabled.

Not until he was out of sight did she raise her hand, the one that had touched the strap, and look at it. There were brown flecks of dried blood on her fingertips. She washed them off, washing hard for a full minute.

The lettering on the office door still read:

Albert Marshall
Factor
Turpentine, Cotton, Lumber

even though Albert had been dead for fifteen years now and retired for five years before that, while his nephew Elton operated the business as manager but never owner. Now, in Elton's office, Howard Cason was trying to explain the results of his trip to Florida, and having slow going.

"Changed?" Elton Marshall said. "What do you mean: they've sobered him up?"

"I told you," Cason said. "It's more than that." He stood up and crossed to the window. Here he could look down on the courthouse square and the gray monument of the Confederate soldier, motionless in the gray winter rain. After a moment he said, "You remember that story old Colonel Wilton used to tell: about the soldier at Shiloh who was leaning against a pine tree when a cannon ball cut the tree off just over his head? They thought for a while the ball had grazed him, or the tree fallen on him, because he wouldn't move. There wasn't any sign of a wound on him, but he just stood there, until somebody took him by the hand and led him away. And for two weeks after that, whenever he was left alone he just stood, or sat or lay, however he was, perfectly still until somebody moved him again. It's almost like that with David. Of course he can move and talk; but it's almost as if it were done in his sleep, in a trance of some kind."

"So what will happen?"

"They won't hang him, not under the circumstances. I told you about the woman. And David was obviously drunk. He was still drunk when they brought him in. But they'll send him to the chaingang—the turpentine camps."

Elton Marshall's lips made a faint popping sound as he parted them. It was a frequent, unconscious gesture that seemed half smile, half snarl. "That appears to be what he wants, to judge from what you say."

"He doesn't know what he's doing, Mr. Elton. Before I left I had the local doctor go up and look at him. He said there is nothing wrong with David; he's not hurt in any way. But——"

"You can put that on the bill too," Marshall said. "Along with the five dollars you gave Joe." He sat with his fingertips lightly joined and resting on the edge of the big roll-top desk before him. He was sixty years old, a short, semibald man neither lean nor fat, with a face that seemed to have been put

together from an incongruous collection of leftover parts: a pale, thin-lipped mouth, a strong, almost eagle-like nose set between flabby gray cheeks, the wide-set eyes from which a too-casual observer might have got an impression of innocence. "You say that under Florida law a man can plead guilty to murder if he wants to, and the court doesn't have to appoint a lawyer if he doesn't want one?"

"Yes, but——"

"But what, Howard? He's refused your services. If he changes his mind, he can notify either of us. If he wants a Florida lawyer I—the estate—will pay. No one can say I haven't done everything I could be expected to do."

"He doesn't know what he is getting into."

"He's close to thirty years old." Cason did not answer, and Marshall said, "I don't understand this sudden solicitude on your part, Howard."

"It's not solicitude. If this man Mawson had killed him, it would have been all right with me. But now I'm going to have to tell Laura, explain to her somehow. It won't be easy."

"Why not? All you have to do is explain that it's not the death of his father and mother that has upset David: it's because he killed his pregnant paramour, the backwoods, half-witted wife of a small-time moonshiner, in a drunken brawl. Then add that he claims to have been in love with her, which should remove any glamour Laura might otherwise attach to the matter. I don't think it will hurt your chances with her."

"I hadn't planned to tell her any of the details."

"No? Maybe that's best. She'll hear them elsewhere anyhow."

"Not unless you tell them," Cason said, and thought, Why do I work for him? I can live in this county without the Marshall business. Why do I let him insult me—except he doesn't even know it's an insult. It's just the way his mind works. And said, aloud, "I want Laura to understand that I—that we volunteered, tried to help David, and that he refused, that he is

doing what he deliberately chooses to do. That may be hard for her to understand."

"And even harder for her mother." Again his lips made that faint popping sound, parting in the flickering expression that was mingled smile and snarl. "David's always taken a long time to sober up from one of his debauches. The chances are that any day now he'll decide he's been in jail long enough. We'll have a telegram to come and get him."

"I'm not sure we could get him, now," Cason said. He took his derby from the top of Marshall's roll-top desk. "I'll go and see Laura now, Mr. Marshall."

CHAPTER 3

Laura Raymond was twenty-four and since her sixteenth birthday she had considered herself engaged to David Mayfield. She knew (she always had known) that originally the engagement had been largely her mother's idea. Certainly it had never been David's. But years ago Mildred Thomas Raymond had set out to get for her daughter the nearest facsimile possible of that which Mildred Thomas had been unable to get for herself.

In 1865, when she was eleven years old, Mildred Thomas had fallen in love with sixteen-year-old Doyle Mayfield. She had known him all her eleven years, but love began when she saw him wearing the uniform of a University of Alabama cadet, one arm in a sling to testify to the gallantry with which he had fought (however unsuccessfully) to prevent General Croxton and his Union cavalry from burning the university. Her love had continued undiminished even though it soon proved to be hopeless: Clara Marshall, who was her second cousin and best friend, also fell in love with young Doyle, and Clara had two tremendous advantages over Mildred. Clara was extremely beautiful and quite rich. Mildred was pretty in a moderate sort of way, but the Thomas family had never been wealthy, and what little money Captain Edmund Thomas had he'd invested in Confederate bonds. Clara's father Albert had tried to warn him (they were friends), but at the time it was difficult to be too explicit on these matters without also being unpatriotic. Consequently, when the war was over the Thomas

family was left with nothing except a farm and a few mules, most of them too gaunted for working. The Mayfield family was no better off than the Thomases—and Doyle was a young man who obviously deserved and needed money. In simple justice, no young man that handsome should ever need to work. So, since Mildred and Clara were not only second cousins but best friends, there was nothing Mildred could do except gracefully surrender Doyle to Clara with her blessing. They were married in 1871 when Doyle was twenty-three and Clara eighteen. Two years later Mildred married a schoolteacher named Sam Raymond. She had been faithful to him, but she had continued to love Doyle.

There could be no doubt of all this since Mildred herself had frequently repeated the story (though always in strictest confidence) not only to a number of acquaintances but also to her daughter and husband. It was one of the first stories that Laura Raymond could remember being told. It had always seemed very romantic. As a child she often saw Cousin Doyle riding about the town, sometimes on horseback, sometimes in a racing surrey, always very handsome, beautifully dressed, gallant. Her own father had taken to drink about the time she was born; he had lost his job teaching school and had died in some shadowy, unpleasant way not long afterward. Growing older she barely remembered him. She and her mother had moved into the house on Oak Street, which belonged actually to Cousin Clara but on which no rent had ever been paid and which eventually the town referred to as the Mrs. Mildred Raymond place.

Laura could not remember when she first heard the hints that she and David would make a very handsome couple. David was almost, if not quite, as handsome as his father. Of course there was sometimes a remote quality about him, as if he listened to the sound of a distant drum: or, as Elton Marshall had once put it, to the opening of a distant bottle. But that was only a youthful eccentricity and while it might some-

times detract from his immediate charm it did not alter his physical attractiveness. And everybody agreed that Laura was every bit as beautiful as her Cousin Clara had ever been. ("With that hair black as a crow's wing, sugar, and those black eyes, and your skin just like a peach, even that David Mayfield is going to be kneeling at your feet.") True, they were fourth cousins; but there was nothing, absolutely nothing, wrong with fourth cousins getting married. Both mothers agreed on this: they were still best friends. And after Laura's sixteenth birthday party there was a tacit understanding between the families about the engagement, even though both were considered too young for a formal announcement.

Immediately after that sixteenth birthday party David, who was twenty, had disappeared for three days. She heard later that he had gone on a spree (to celebrate, her mother said) and wound up in the Brewton jail, held there until they could sober him up and send him home. Mildred Raymond's attitude toward alcohol varied with her attitude toward the person who drank it. It had been a mistake to allow her husband to drink, because he was not and never had been essentially a gentleman. But with David a three-day drunk, she told her daughter, was simply an indication of high spirits. Let him get it out of his system before they were married and he would make an ideal husband. And besides, everyone in south Alabama knew the Mayfields and nothing could happen to him.

Now, facing Howard Cason in the big, dimly lighted parlor of the house on Oak Street, Laura remembered for a moment the occasion of David's first spree. Only it hadn't been his first, she thought quickly; he'd been drinking ever since he went off to college the first time, to Princeton, where he only stayed for a half year before they expelled him. So their engagement—neither that first tacit one eight years ago nor the recent formal announcement—could have nothing to do with it, she thought, touching the thought only lightly with the edge of her mind and putting the whole thing away quickly. She said, "But they

can't, Howard. They can't actually send him to prison. They must know it was an accident. He was drinking and it was simply an accident."

Cason said again, "No one knows exactly how it did happen. And David won't say anything, except that he's guilty."

"Then you'll have to explain to them that he wouldn't—couldn't do anything like that deliberately. You'll—" She stopped, watching his face. "All right. If he won't let you help him, then Cousin Elton will just have to send someone else. Get a lawyer in Florida."

"He refused to have a lawyer at all."

"But why?" She stood with her hands clasped together and pushed against her breast. Then her hands, her whole body began to tremble. "Why?" she said again, and began to weep, almost without sound, the tears streaming down her face. "Why would he do this, Howard? How could he? When—right after . . ." She turned away from him and sank down in a chair.

Howard Cason moved and put a hand gently on her shoulder without speaking. Outside it was still raining; the rain hung like a gray curtain against the outside of the windows; the heavy rose and blue drapes on the inside looked almost black in the dim light. To Cason's right a coal fire burned without flame in the grate. I wonder if she really loves him, he thought for what might have been the ten thousandth time. I wonder if she knows whether she does or not, has ever tried to know honestly. I hope now she doesn't, for her sake now rather than mine. And thought, Only it may hurt worse if she doesn't love him than if she does: the abandonment, the scandal, the whispers behind her back. Because if she doesn't love him it will be harder to forgive.

Cason said gently, "He may change his mind before the trial."

She looked up quickly. "Of course. And when he does, you and Cousin Elton will bring him home."

Cason did not answer directly, but she did not notice this. She walked with him to the door and gave him her hand. He said, "I'll do what I can, Laura."

"I know you will."

She watched him cross the porch, pause, then move out into the rain. It was cold, holding the door open, and after a moment she closed it and went down the long, semidark hallway to her mother's bedroom.

Mildred Raymond, dressed in deep mourning, was reading a copy of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. The curtains were drawn against the rain and cold and Mrs. Raymond read by the light of a china lamp. In the fireplace an oak log burned slowly. Laura said, "Howard was just here, Mother."

"I thought I heard someone. Where's David?"

"He's still in that—jail. In Florida."

Mrs. Raymond was a plump woman with a soft, empty face across which the proper, if minor, emotions could move as easily as light and shadow. Now she looked faintly surprised. "What do you mean? Why didn't Howard bring him home?"

"He wouldn't let Howard help him. He said he was—guilty. He didn't want to get out."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, he didn't want to get out?" And then, "Are they letting him stay drunk in that jail?"

"I don't know." She had begun to cry again, softly, not because of pain but of something that was more nearly fear, a sense of being lost, from herself as well as the world, in a new kind of darkness, of being threatened by something she had not yet turned to face and did not want to face. "I don't know," she said again.

"We'll just have to get him back," Mrs. Raymond said. "I'll talk to—" She had been about to say, "Clara and Doyle," but stopped. "—to Elton," she said, her voice a little empty now.

"Cousin Elton may not want him back, Mother. He doesn't like David. You know that. He's never liked him."

"He'll have to bring him back anyway. If he doesn't, people will say it's because, with Clara gone, he's afraid David will take over the estate. I'll tell him that."

"But suppose David—is guilty? Suppose Cousin Elton can't get him out?" It was part of the thought she had been hiding from herself. "We don't really know what David did, except that—that they say he killed somebody. A woman."

"I don't believe it." Mildred Raymond's voice was as matter-of-fact as a closed door. "I won't believe it."

"I don't either." Laura wiped the tears from her eyes and with them some of the strange darkness that had frightened her. "Howard says he will go back down there and talk to David again."

"Once he is married," Mrs. Raymond said, "he'll settle down, just as Doyle did. You'll see, honey."

CHAPTER 4

The card game was still going on in the first right-hand cell of the Pine County jail. It might have been the same game, the same players Howard Cason had seen here yesterday, the same he had seen six weeks before, the dark faces above the dirty cards, the soft greeting which Cason answered without pausing, as if these were a fixed part of the jail itself, unchanging as the bars on doors and windows. He went past, the voices flowing softly after him, "Black jack and the big . . ."

Mayfield said, "Hello, Howard."

"Hello, David." And after a moment, "You haven't changed your mind?"

"No."

"I've talked to the county prosecutor and the judge. I don't know that I could help you now, if you did change. It's too late."

"It doesn't matter."

Beyond the windows of Mayfield's cell the sparrows still fluttered, from pale sunlight to pale shadow. "Neither the judge nor the prosecutor," Cason said, "wants the expense and time of a trial if it isn't necessary, if you are going to plead guilty anyway."

"I told the prosecutor I would."

"So he said." Cason found he was not looking at the man in front of him but at the window beyond and the coming and going of sparrows. He said, "This man Mawson isn't very well thought of in the county. On the other hand, he does have

relatives, and they all vote. If you plead guilty, the judge will sentence you to life. That keeps the voters happy. But there'll be no objection, from judge or prosecutor, if you ask for a pardon after two years."

"Two years," Mayfield said, almost gently. "Two years, and murder will be atoned, paid in full? To whom?"

"To the State of Florida. I'm a lawyer, David, not a priest."

"I know." He was clean-shaven now, the classically handsome features almost empty of expression. "You've done all you could to help me, Howard. More than I deserve; more than I can understand the reason for, unless it's Laura. How is she?"

"She thinks—she hopes, I'll bring you home with me. She still hopes, even after all the talk of these last two months."

"That must have been hard on her. But she'll get over it, Howard."

"She still loves you."

"She never loved me. Not really. It was just the way she was raised, by her mother and mine, to believe she did."

"It seems to have convinced her."

"Yes. And finding out she was wrong will hurt, just as it always hurts to learn we are wrong. But maybe it will help her understand what love really is. Maybe we all have to be hurt before we understand."

"What?" the lawyer said. He was aware of a blind and baffled anger for which he could determine neither the exact source nor direction. "What in hell has happened to you, David? You always were crazy. But I never heard you try to preach before."

"I'm not very good at it, am I?"

"No, you're not."

They stood facing one another through the bars of the door. And after a moment Cason said, "All right. I've done what I came here for, unless you change your mind. Is there anything you want me to tell Laura?"

"Whatever you think best."

But still Cason did not move. When he spoke next his voice was low. "There's a man named Durrance has charge of convict labor in this area. I'll speak to him. I don't know what good it will do."

They did not shake hands. Cason turned and went down the hall, past the cell where the Negroes squatted around the soiled cards, the soft voices flowing out over him, "High low and the lady luck, giv' me . . ." The jailer opened the door and he went through into the office. Ryan Durrance sat with one leg across the edge of a desk.

"That's the first man I ever heard of just couldn't wait to do time on a chaingang," the jailer said.

Cason said, "Mr. Durrance, I'd like to speak to you a moment, if I may."

"All right," Durrance said. He did not move.

"About the prisoner. Mr. Mayfield." He was watching Durrance's face as he would have watched a jury, trying to decide just how far to go, the exact thing to say.

"What about him?" Durrance's voice was polite, but he did not get off the desk.

So he doesn't want me to talk to him alone, Cason thought. He said, "As you probably know, Mr. Mayfield comes from a rather prominent family in Alabama. A well-to-do family. If he should be under your supervision, I would appreciate anything you might be able to do for him."

"He'll be treated like any other convict."

"I understand that," Cason said, thinking, Careful now. The man's on edge, like a cocked gun. He said, "I only meant in case he should need medical care, something more than is normally provided. If you will contact me, I will be glad to see that any bills are paid."

"Sure. Only where he's going, he won't have any bills."

"If he should . . ." Cason said, thinking, Don't push it, don't say any more. He went out, avoiding unconsciously the saliva-stained patches of flooring.

Joe Booker, the Negro, waited for him on the front steps. He said, "He aint changed his mind, Mr. Howard?"

"No."

"When they going to send him to the chaingang?"

"Soon. I talked with the judge this morning."

"You got to make 'em send me with him."

"How? You can't go with him."

"It wouldn't have helped none to get in the jail," the Negro said. "I thought maybe I could help him more being outside, in case he needed something. But I got to be with him on the chaingang, Mr. Howard. I got to look after him."

"They are not going to let you follow him in the turpentine woods, Joe. You know that."

"That's how come you got to speak to the sheriff, so they'll send me to the same camp. The sheriff'd do it for you, Mr. Howard."

"Wait," Cason said. He had a feeling of unreality, of dream-walking in the thin January sunlight. "How do you plan to go about this? There's got to be a charge of some kind."

"I done thought about that too." He took from his hip pocket a thin, flat bottle which Cason recognized instantly as holding corn whiskey and handed it to the lawyer. "All you got to do is tell the sheriff you bought it off me, that I been selling moonshine ever since I been down here."

"You don't think he knows who's bootlegging and who isn't?"

"Yessir. He knows all right. But they always need niggers on the chaingang. I can plead guilty like Mr. David."

"But why?" Cason said, crying it almost. "Why?" The Negro did not answer and Cason stood there, holding the bottle, thinking, Maybe I'm already drunk, or crazy: David, Joe, all of us. He lifted the bottle and took a long swallow. Then with Joe Booker following he went back into the courthouse.

CHAPTER 5

Lying very still, David Mayfield could feel the iron shackle around his right ankle, the short chain that led from it across the side of his foot to the other chain, the long one that extended the entire length of the tent and to which all the prisoners were fastened, like animals tied along both sides of a fence. He was not actually touching the dead man on his right; yet it seemed to him that he could feel the body as distinctly as he felt the shackle about his ankle: he could feel it stiffening in the quiet dark, growing cold, exuding a coldness that touched wormlike on his own flesh and made him shiver.

On his left Joe Booker said, "Jus' be still, Mr. David. Jus' be still." The Negro spoke with his mouth almost against David's ear; the voice could not have been heard two feet away.

"All right," David said, but not aloud, just a silent moving of his lips against the dark. He could feel the cold soaking into him, and again the shivering passed through his muscles.

It was not fear but rather a shocked incredulity, a quality of mingled nightmare and reality. It seemed to him he could not only feel the body beside him stiffening in the cold dark but could still hear the shot: the flat, not-loud, unemphatic sound of it; the impact of the bullet; the brief, gasping sounds from the man whose name he did not know, whose face, he realized now, he had never actually looked at although they had been shackled together for most of the preceding twelve hours. And then the querulous voice of the guard, "The next one of your bastards wants to get up better ask permission. I done told you that, time after time."

He didn't even know which one of us he shot, Mayfield thought. Doesn't know now whether the man is dead or wounded or maybe not hurt at all. Doesn't try to find out. Why? Because he believes he missed, meant to miss? Or because he doesn't care, one way or the other?

As though we were no longer human beings, Mayfield thought. Not just the prisoners, the guards too. And not animals either, but something out of another world, another planet. Changing even before we changed into convict clothes, he thought. It was the moment we were let out of the cells: going in one step from prisoners but men anyway, black and white, in a county jail—to whatever we are now. The moment we were herded out of the cells, he thought, remembering the mild surprise with which he watched as the jailer handcuffed his left wrist to the right wrist of Joe Booker. Inside the jail the Negroes and whites had been kept in separate cells, as nearly as possible at separate ends of the corridor; but now the jailer fastened Joe's other hand to another Negro, another Negro to that one, and reached next for a white man, obviously taking them in that order simply because that was the way they stood.

"Now wait!" the white man said. He was small, thin-faced, wearing ragged overalls with the stain of pine pitch on them: a sawmill hand named Enod Parker, who on a recent Saturday night had cut the throat of his closest friend in a brawl the cause of which he could not remember. "You aint planning to handcuff me to a nigger, are you?"

"All right," the jailer said, pleasantly enough. He reached past Parker to the next prisoner, a white-haired old man who wore a long-tailed alpaca coat over a shirt that had neither tie nor collar. "You," he said, and handcuffed him to the Negro. And then to Parker, "I reckon you don't mind being handcuffed between two white men now?"

"With niggers? I may be in jail, but——"

They were in the big, unbarred room on the second floor of

the courthouse. The jailer, the six prisoners, the sheriff, and several other men Mayfield had never seen before.

One of these, who held a .30 Winchester rifle in his hand, said, "You aint in jail now. You're on the chaingang."

That was all. Still muttering, Parker was handcuffed on one side to the old man, on the other side to Mayfield. The six prisoners, chained in a circle now, were herded awkwardly down the stairs, across the wide, marble-floored hallway, and down a flight of side steps.

The courthouse stood in the center of a square. The street in front, the main one, was paved with oyster shell, but on this side the street was rutted sand, with hitching posts along the edge. There were several wagons here. The man with the Winchester pointed at one of them. "Climb in."

A woman passing along the board sidewalk averted her head and hurried by. Loungers on the front steps of the courthouse came around the side to watch. The prisoners got into the wagon with difficulty. An old Negro drove, the guard with the rifle sitting beside him. In the wagon bed the six prisoners stood facing one another in a rough ellipse. No one called out to them; it seemed to Mayfield that the wagon passed in almost dreamlike silence between the store fronts and the quiet, turning faces, along a street of wide lawns and pleasant houses, over a wooden bridge across the Suwannee River, and into the country beyond.

It was a country of virgin long-leaf yellow pine forest. Everywhere tall, straight trees rose out of a gently sloping land that was almost parklike beneath them: brown grass splotted only now and then with palmetto thickets, the brown trunks of the trees touched with faint purple tones where the morning sunlight struck them, and over all the roof of dark green needles. The trees ran on for mile after mile, apparently forever, so that the mules and the wagon and the men in it did not seem to move at all but only to mark time in the sand-rutted

road while the pale February sun, to the left and behind them, rose slowly higher.

Then (they had been in the wagon about three hours now) the forest changed. Here a deep hole, sometimes three or four of them, depending on the size of the tree, had been cut into the base of every pine. Above these the bark had been slashed away in narrow V-shaped gashes, the point of each V leading into one of the holes at the tree's base.

"Them trees jus' been boxed," one of the Negro convicts said. "They aint got more'n a couple of streaks on 'em."

"You a turpentine nigger?"

"Man, I's a turpentinaing fool. I go through the woods so fast it take a train to get me back to camp at night. Last year I was cutting boxes for old Mr. John Perry, and the way I was shouting 'Samson!' the teller-man said he figgered I must be twins."

The other Negro laughed, and abruptly David Mayfield was remembering a winter morning when he was five, perhaps six years old, and had gone with his father into the turpentine woods somewhere below Brewton. His father rarely had anything to do with either the factorage or plantation; why he was there this day Mayfield could not remember. But he could remember the looks of the forest in the early morning and the fog drifting among the trees and the sound of unseen axes: and most of all, the voices calling, "Alabama!" "Seaboard!" "Big Boston!" the voices themselves sounding as happy on the cold morning air as the occasional bursts of male Negro laughter that came out of the mist. He had asked what the shouted words meant, and the white man to whom his father was talking explained. Each worker adopted a name for himself. Whenever he finished cutting a box into a pine, he shouted that name and the white teller checked it in his book, in this way keeping up with the amount of work done and the pay due. "Poontang!" "Moonshine!" "Chattanooga!"

"How many boxes you pull in a week?" The white-haired old man asked the turpentine Negro.

"Twelve thousand. And I had a long-legged black gal used to slip out and meet me at noon, jus' so I wouldn't get tired of resting."

"You pull twelve thousand boxes for Mr. John Perry, you'll pull twenty thousand for Ryan Durrance."

The Negro looked at him, not laughing now. "Aint nobody pull twenty thousand. Sixteen maybe. Maybe eighteen for one week, if you works from can till can't."

"You'll pull twenty when Ryan Durrance waves Black Annie at you. Aint that right, mister?" He addressed the last sentence to the guard.

The guard did not answer. He did not seem to hear. The sun was almost overhead now, and from a paper bag on the seat beside him the guard took a can of sardines. Carefully he turned back the top. The odor came sharply to the men behind him, who had eaten a jail breakfast at six that morning and nothing since. They watched him eat, taking crackers from the paper bag and dipping them in the oil, his jaws working slowly, steadily. He finished the sardines, emptied the last of the cracker crumbs from the paper bag into the can and licked it clean, threw the bag and can out of the wagon.

In the back of the wagon no one had spoken since the guard started to eat. It was not that any one of them had expected the guard to share his lunch; there was obviously not that much of it. It was not even the fact that no one had prepared a lunch for the prisoners. It's the way he did it, Mayfield thought. If we had been dogs in the back of the wagon he'd have spoken to us. "You hounds got to wait until we get to camp." But to us there wasn't any need to speak.

The guard took a water jug from the floor of the wagon, drank, and replaced the corncob stopper. He said to the Negro driving, "Stop a minute."

The wagon stopped; the guard climbed down, holding his rifle. With his other hand he unbuttoned his trousers.

The old man in the alpaca coat said, "If'n you don't want this wagon messed up, mister, you better let us get out too for jus' a minute. My bladder aint too good."

"All right."

They climbed down in their clumsy circle. Each worked at the buttons of his trousers with his right hand, his left hand pulled against the thigh of the man next to him. "You young fellows can hold it all day maybe," the old man said. "I can't no more." Abruptly he grinned up at Mayfield. "Be seventy-two years old next month. Bet you wouldn't a thought that, would you?"

CHAPTER 6

They climbed back into the wagon. The sun was to their right now. A few scrawny, long-horned cattle, as wild almost as deer, grazed under the pines. Twice they passed houses, a few acres of cleared land not yet planted except for small gardens in which winter collards were going to seed. Then the forest closed in; but now it had changed again. Here the bark had been slashed from the trees to a height of ten feet or more and though most of the trees were still alive they had a grotesque, almost deformed look. Others had died; still others had blown over, snapping at the base where the deep boxes had been chopped into them.

"They done sure worked out this part of the woods."

"And they damn sure better sawmill it before long," Enod Parker said bitterly. "I aint never believed turpentine lumber was much good; but it won't be no good at all if fire gets in here."

"Like that up ahead?"

Later it would seem to David Mayfield as though a good bit of reversed human history had been compressed into that one day's journey: the men (behind bars, but still men) taken out of their cells and chained together, herded together across the marble halls of the county's temple of justice; the stares of passers-by who seemed more repelled than curious; the virgin forest where, within a mile of the town itself, deer and bobcat tracks could be seen crossing the sand road. The turpentine woods with the trees scarred and bleeding. And now this.

The forest ended abruptly. Here and there across the empty,

barren country ahead a dead pine still stood, like giant cactus rising from a desert. Between and beyond these were the stumps, the mangled remains of the forest, some of them square-topped from the lumbermen's saws, some torn and twisted where a weakened tree had gone down before wind or disease. Among them were occasional clumps of fire-blackened palmetto, a fire-killed seedling, stretches of naked sand. But there was no life, either on the ground or in the pale February sky. There was nothing to sustain life. Even a quail would starve in this country, Mayfield thought. Even a rabbit. Later spring grass would come up through the scorched stubble and the semiwild, long-horned cattle that ran fenceless over the country would come to graze. But now there was nothing except, a mile or so straight ahead—a small island afloat on a sea of wasteland—a dozen deformed but still living pines. As the wagon moved closer Mayfield could see the scattering of unpainted shacks beneath the pines. And then the two tents inside a small, barbed-wire enclosure.

The guard moved his head slightly to look at the convicts standing in the back of the wagon. "There it is," he said. "Home, sweet home."

The wagon stopped in front of one of the shacks. The guard got down. He did not speak to the men and they remained standing in the wagon while he went into the shack. Then he was back again. "All right," he said.

They got down awkwardly. "Mister," the old man said, "I just got to take a leak. My bladder done been troubling me for——"

The guard did not answer him, and the men were already moving in their clumsy circle up the wooden steps and across the porch of the shack. Inside there was a single large room with a waist-high counter across the far end. Back of this stood a tall, thin man with bad teeth. When the prisoners were inside the room he asked the guard, "Which one of 'em is that crazy fellow killed Tom Mawson's wife?"

The guard pointed a thumb at Mayfield. "That one."

The man back of the counter said, "Well, I be damned." He looked at Mayfield as he might have an animal on exhibit. "He don't look crazy, do he?"

"You can't tell nothing by the way they look," the guard said. He had removed the handcuffs from the old man. "Get your clothes off."

"What?"

"Your clothes. You don't aim to put stripes on over 'em, do you?" He released Enod Parker's other hand, the one fastened to Mayfield. "You too."

Behind the counter there were several shelves piled with clothing. From these, without making any effort to check sizes, the clerk took two pairs of striped trousers, two shirts, four shoes, and two caps and put them on the counter. He said to the guard, "I seen Tom in Pinetree last week. I asked him what'd he do if the sheriff caught him again and sent him out here on the same chaingang with the fellow killed his wife. He said he'd kill him sure."

"He might at that," the guard said. "He's a mean son of a bitch." He took the cuff off Mayfield's left wrist. "Get your clothes off."

"What do I do with these I'm wearing?"

"Give 'em to Mr. Duncan. You aint going to need them for a while."

"I expect not," Mayfield said, thinking, He said "Mister Duncan" in the same way one white man always refers to another as Mister when talking to a Negro; as if I weren't white any more. But he thought this without resentment, his mind simply recording the fact in the same way it had recorded the first sight of the barren, cutover and burned-over land around the prison camp. Meanwhile he was taking off his clothes, his head bent as he pulled his trousers down over his shoes.

So he was not looking when Enod Parker said, "Ai God, Mister, you don't expect a white man to wear these here shoes,

do you? They aint even mates. This here one——” His voice stopped, the sound of the last word cut off by a dull thump, followed by another.

Mayfield looked up. Parker lay face down on the floor. The guard stood over him, holding his rifle about shoulder high, butt forward. “You the same one was raising all that trouble back at the jail,” he said, his voice more plaintive than angry. “Aint you going to ever learn?”

Parker did not move. The guard kicked him, still without anger, the way he might have put spurs to a horse he was riding to start it moving. “Get up and put them shoes on.”

Parker got slowly to his feet. None of the prisoners had made a sound. The clerk said, speaking to no one particularly, “Always got trouble with these newcocks. Seems like they just aint worth a damn until Ryan gets on ’em with Black Annie a few times. Here.” He pushed a pile of clothing toward Mayfield.

The shirt fit fairly well. The trousers would not button around the waist and cut in the crotch. The left shoe fit, but the right one was at least two sizes large. Maybe they’ll let me keep my own shoes, he thought, and was about to ask when he felt the hand touch his shoulder and looking up saw Joe Booker moving his head slowly from side to side.

None of the clothing issued the prisoners was new. We already look like old timers, Mayfield thought, walking with the five others down the sand-rutted street, the guard following. They went now to the blacksmith shop where the blacksmith, a short, black Negro, was shoeing a horse. Both he and the Negro helping him wore stripes, but there seemed to be no guard around to watch them. Trusties, Mayfield thought.

The guard said, “Let that mare wait, Bennie. I want some leg irons on these newcocks, so I can turn ’em in the compound and get ’em busy.”

“Yessir, Cap’n.”

"You," the guard said. He motioned the old prisoner forward.

"Mister, I got to step outside first—if you don't want me to wet these fancy new clothes you just give me. I been telling you."

"Wet 'em," the guard said. "I don't have to wear them."

"Yessir, but I do. And I'm right proud of 'em. Be seventy-two next month and this the first time I ever had any these here fancy striped ones."

The guard began to laugh, the sudden belly laughter of the countryman. "All right," he said. "You got such a shine for them stripes, I wouldn't want you to ruin 'em." He turned to Mayfield. "You."

Mayfield stepped forward, uncertain what he was supposed to do. The blacksmith did not speak to him. He reached down and caught Mayfield's right ankle and lifted it and put his foot on the anvil block. Like he was shoeing a horse, Mayfield thought, watching the swing of the hammer that might have crushed his foot but did not touch it, watching the iron band bolted in place about his ankle, the eight-inch chain with a ring at the end hanging from it. The blacksmith put his foot on the ground again, and he moved back and another man took his place.

They are more careful with the fit of the leg irons than of the shoes, Mayfield thought. Because the irons are more important, I suppose. A new kind of wedding band around the ankle. I ran from one wedding and wound up with another: with this iron leg ring I thee wed. And thought suddenly, Till death do us part? A marriage without divorce? But he was still without fear, his mind still recording impressions and ideas with a kind of remote detachment as though he stood outside his own body, watching, alert, but with no intense personal interest. He wondered just what was the purpose of that single leg iron and the dangling chain with the ring at the end.

When the last man was fitted they were herded back into

the street, not chained together now but moving almost as awkwardly as before, each one conscious of the new weight about his ankle, the clinking chain knocking at his foot. They went along the camp's narrow, unpaved street to the compound at the end. This was a single acre of land circled by a high, barbed-wire fence inside which there were two tents and a tree. The tree had been turpented years before and after that it had caught fire. But it still lived, holding deformed and scraggly limbs against the sky.

A crippled convict opened the compound gate for them, shut it again when they had passed through. The guard stopped outside the fence. He said, "They all yours now, Mac. I reckon you can keep 'em busy till supper."

The cripple took off his cap, holding it in one hand while he clutched a homemade walking cane with the other. His right hip was higher than the left, his body bent forward over the cane: a small, middle-aged man with a face that managed somehow to combine animal shrewdness with a look of fey and almost childlike innocence. "Yessir, Cap'n. Anything particular you want 'em to do?"

"Let 'em earn their supper."

"Yessir." He moved, his right leg swinging stiffly. "Y'all heard the Cap'n. Let's get busy. You niggers go over to that woodpile and start chopping wood for the cookstove. Y'all"—he turned to the white men—"pull them tarpaulins out of that first tent and take the straw out and burn it. I'll get some fresh. And God knows it needs it."

There seemed to be no one else inside the compound. Outside the fence the guard who had brought the prisoners from town stood talking to another man in civilian clothes. The three Negroes moved toward the woodpile, the whites toward the first tent.

It was a long narrow tent with the flaps raised so that it offered no real obstruction to the view. At each end of the tent there was the stump of a pine tree. That much Mayfield could

tell while he was still thirty feet away. Then, when he was within twenty feet, he could smell it. Even on the growing chill of late afternoon the odor took hold of his nostrils like a hand, choking him.

"Ai God," the old man said. "What kind of a stink is that?"

"Niggers!" Parker said.

"It's more'n just niggers. No nigger ever smelled like that."

"Goddamn niggers!" Parker said. He stopped, staring a little wildly around the enclosure. There was nothing else beyond this tent except the tree and the second tent that was obviously the cook tent: it too had the flaps raised so they could see inside it, the single long table, the benches, and at the far end a huge, woodburning stove, and see also now the Negro convict working there. "You mean," Parker said, his voice aghast, addressed to no one in particular, "we all going to sleep in the same tent, white and niggers?"

"It damn sure looks like it," the old man said. And then, almost cheerfully, "At least we going to have clean straw."

They moved up to the edge of the tent and stopped. The smell was overpowering: rot and filth and ancient sweat. Before it the quiet, almost dreamlike detachment with which Mayfield had regarded everything for the past two months began for the first time to crumble. He felt the muscles of his stomach contract spasmodically. "I reckon the quicker the better," the old man said.

Down the center of the tent, from the pine stump at one end to the stump at the other, ran an iron chain. On each side of this was a heavy canvas tarpaulin, folded double, the folds alongside the chain. In the folds on both sides, holes had been cut every two and a half feet.

Mayfield stooped and caught one corner of the canvas, lifted it. Beneath there was rotting, matted straw. The straw moved as he pulled the canvas; then there was motion inside the straw itself, a motion like that of boiling water that for a moment he did not recognize and then did not believe, a stirring of tiny

white bubbles within and over the sides of the almost hollow body of a long-dead rat.

"Ai God!" the old man said. "Somebody been sleeping on it." He regarded the maggot-frothing corpse with interest. "Big son of a bitch, aint it? But I reckon nobody could smell it particular, mixed up with all these other stinks."

They dragged the tarpaulins away from the straw. There were no rakes or pitchforks to work with, and remembering the guard's reaction to Parker's complaint about his shoes no one wanted to ask. Instead they began to carry the filthy straw by the armful to the lee side of the compound. No one had a match. "I'll get a splinter from the cookstove," Mayfield said. He was halfway to the other tent before he thought, I said that to get away from carrying the straw, from touching it. But it doesn't soil me more than it does them. I have no right to run away from that part of the work. He almost turned and went back, but wondered what he would say, how he could explain returning without the burning splinter, and so went ahead.

It was getting dark now but one lid was off the cookstove, throwing a red and orange glare against the top of the tent, washing like colored water across the dark and shining face of the cook. "Hello," Mayfield said. "I need a lighted splinter, something I can set fire to that straw with."

"All right," the cook said—and Mayfield noted that he spoke not in the usual tone of a Negro to a white man but as he might have spoken to another of his own race: civil, quiet, polite. "The Lord knows it's time somebody burned that stuff."

"We ought to burn the whole tent."

The cook's head did not move, only his eyes, locating the guard outside the fence more than a hundred feet away. His voice was soft. "You said it, man, I didn't." He stooped and opened the door of the stove. Firelight leaped out upon the dark face, the bent body; it gleamed along the chain that ran from the cook's ankle to one leg of the stove. The dark hand moved and came out of the stove holding a burning stick of pine. "Here's your fire."

CHAPTER 7

Mac, the crippled trusty, brought a wagonload of fresh straw. Near the barbed-wire fence the old straw burned slowly, putting out a heavy smoke and an odor almost overpowering when anyone came near it. Beyond the fire-glow darkness had closed in. But inside the compound there was still no one except the cook, the trusty, and the six convicts who had arrived that afternoon.

Mac hung lanterns at each end of the sleeping tent and of the cook tent. "You better keep kind of close to 'em," he said. They were spreading the new straw now, replacing the tarpaulins. "Some of these free men get kind of nervous when we got a bunch of newcocks in the compound. Some of 'em don't see a man where he ought to be, they liable to shoot just to find out where he is."

Mayfield looked toward where the three Negro convicts were chopping wood. He could hear the axes, but the men themselves were invisible. "What about them?" he asked, thinking of Joe Booker.

"They all right, long as they keep working. I reckon."

The old man said, "I aint got the strength to run if I had the chance. I aint had nothing to eat since six this morning. Don't they never have supper here? Where's all the other prisoners?"

"They aint working," Parker said. "They aint been able to see to work for more'n a hour."

Mac said, "Them niggers still chopping wood, aint they?"

"They still making noise."

"All right," Mac said. He cocked his head to one side. "Here they come now."

"Where?"

"Listen."

Mayfield heard it then, a sound not much louder than the mutter of wind in the tent flaps overhead. At first it seemed to have neither source nor direction: a faint panting padding sound that might have been the wind itself. And then he knew it came from somewhere behind him and he turned, moving slightly away from the lantern light in which he had been working.

Against the far darkness spots of red and yellow light bobbed gently up and down. They seemed to float, held aloft by the night itself, and by the long suspiring padding sound that flowed beneath them, without forward motion until, abruptly, he realized the lights were burning splinters of fat pine and he could see the arms that held them aloft, the black and white stripes, and then the bearded faces: the light glinting upon the white of an eye, on bared teeth; and he knew the sound was that of many feet running through sand, and of labored breathing.

They came in waves: six men, each with his right hand fastened to a chain that ran across the six of them, and on each flank an unchained trusty carrying the pine-wood flare. Behind the eight of them ran an armed guard, as exhausted as the men before him, and behind the guard came another wave, and behind that another and another.

The first wave washed against the fence of the compound, and stopped. The men were unchained; the gate opened and they came through. Some fell sprawling on the ground as soon as they were inside, others headed straight for the cook tent. There was no pause to bathe, and it occurred to Mayfield he had seen no provision for bathing, and no toilet. But no signs of human excrement either. Where? he thought. Forty, fifty men inside this compound. They can't go forever.

The old man was saying, "Ai God, looks like we going to get some supper at last. Come on!"

Mayfield was suddenly aware of his own hunger. It struck him almost like a blow in the stomach, making him feel weak. He and Parker followed the old man toward the cook tent, where a line already was forming. Whites and Negroes were mixed in the line, but usually in small groups, each group segregating itself voluntarily but none caring enough about this to give up an advantageous place in the line. Mayfield found Joe Booker standing behind him. "You making out all right, Mr. David?" the Negro asked softly.

"Half starved. How about you?"

"I aint going to refuse nothing."

Mayfield looked down at his filth-incrusted hands. "Have you seen any place to wash up? There must be some place."

"I don't think so. Maybe they give us some drinking water we can use."

"It's going to take more than drinking water to get me clean," Mayfield said. And thought, in a flash of the old pain, It's not soap and water that will clean me. I need more than that. Atonement doesn't come with soap and water only. And thought, It doesn't come by eating with dirty hands either.

So when he had his food (all of it ladled from the stove into a gallon bucket) along with a tin cup of water, he found a place at the table and put the bucket down and turned to Joe Booker. "Pour a little of this water on my hands, Joe."

"Just a little. I aint sure they give you any more."

"All right. You want to wash?"

"Yessir."

Mayfield's seat was near the end of the table. The light from the kerosene lantern shone down on the tin bucket in front of him and the food in it: a piece of cornbread about two inches square, and something else he could not recognize, mainly liquid, with a thin skim of fat over it. Where the lantern light touched, the fat gleamed like oil on water. Hungrily, Mayfield

took a bite of the cornbread at the same time he dipped into the bucket and came up with a spoonful of white beans covered by the fat-filmed water in which they had been cooked. He put them in his mouth. His jaws worked once, and stopped.

Up and down the long table the prisoners sat with their heads bent over the metal buckets, eating steadily, swiftly, not quite animal-like in that they used their spoons as long as possible, each man saving his small piece of cornbread to mop up the final bits of liquid. For a moment Mayfield stared at them, the beans and greasy water still in his mouth. The food had all come from the same pot on the stove. He knew that. The muscles of his throat worked once, hard, and he swallowed.

He turned to Joe, his voice low. "This stuff is sour."

"It's rancid all right." Joe took another bite with obvious reluctance. "You better eat a little, Mr. David. Us aint had nothing since breakfast, and I guess they gonna work us tomorrow."

"I can't eat this."

"Try a little." It was almost like a mother coaxing a child.

"I'll eat the cornbread."

It was soggy, sour with the water from the beans. But he got it down. And then he saw that Joe's small square of bread was on the table in front of him. Mayfield looked at it, then at the Negro. He pushed the bread back. "Thanks, Joe. You eat it."

"I got the beans. You aint going to eat the beans, you got to eat the bread."

The one piece of bread had sharpened Mayfield's hunger rather than decreased it. Hunger was like a knife in his stomach, and he was aware of a strictly instinctive impulse to reach over and take the bread Joe offered, though at the same time he knew he was not going to eat the beans. So it's not starvation—just one day's good normal hunger, he thought. He shook his head and smiled. "I've got to learn, Joe. That's why I'm here." He took another half spoonful of the beans, forcing himself to swallow them.

The convicts ate steadily, with a kind of controlled violence, faces bent low over the buckets. It was the first time Mayfield had ever seen whites and Negroes eat together at the same table in a large group. He was aware of the mixing, surprised at it as he might have been surprised at a violation of what he had considered some basic law of nature. But not shocked. I guess I'm beyond shock, he thought, have no right to shock any more. He wondered what Enod Parker was thinking.

"The Cap'n!" Mayfield heard the whisper without knowing where it came from, like a wind that had passed through the tent and was gone. And instantly the tent was charged with a kind of electric tension. The convicts, white and Negro, were still eating, only now there was no sound, no scrape of spoon on bucket, no noisy gulping, not even the sound of breathing. And looking at the men across the table from him Mayfield thought suddenly of a wounded rabbit he had seen years before, crouched in a clump of grass while the hound smelled closer and closer, unable to run and taking its only refuge in an almost violent immobility.

Beside him Joe Booker said very softly, "Make out like you eating, Mr. David."

He picked up his spoon. (And still it was without fear for himself; he was instinctively aware of danger, but it seemed more to threaten the others than himself, and he did not want to injure the unknown men around him by a mistake of ignorance.) He dipped the spoon into the bucket and took it out empty and put it in his mouth. He began to chew.

Ryan Durrance and two guards had come into the tent at the far end. The guards wore dirty jumpers over overalls and tieless shirts buttoned at the collar. Neither had shaved in several days. But Durrance had shaved that morning. His dark suit was old but neat even at the end of the day. A black tie split the small white V of shirt visible above his vest. In his maimed left hand he carried the coiled six-foot leather strap.

He was on the far side of the table from Mayfield. He walked

slowly, looking at the prisoners as he passed. His face held no expression except that given it by the scarred up-twist of his mouth. Once he paused, looking at the bent head of one of the convicts. "This one give you any more trouble since I whipped him?" He might have been asking about the behavior of a horse or mule.

The guard said, "I reckon not, Mr. Durrance. He's working pretty good."

"Cured him, huh," Durrance said. He moved on, without haste, then stopped again. This time he was directly opposite Mayfield, looking at him. There was no sound in the tent. Aware of Durrance's gaze, Mayfield lifted his head and the two men looked straight at one another for the first time. For a while neither moved, except for the slow working of Mayfield's jaw as he thought, I've seen him before. Maybe it was that first night, when they brought me into the town. And once in the jail. He came and stood in the hall and looked at me a long time.

The guard said, "That's the crazy one we just got in today. The one killed Tom Mawson's wife."

"I know," Durrance said. He stood there for another three seconds looking at Mayfield; then he moved on, not hurrying, out of the tent into darkness.

CHAPTER 8

So that's our toilet, Mayfield thought. It was a five-gallon can, empty now though obviously it had been used for this purpose on many previous occasions. The men gathered around it, then moved on, stretching themselves on one half the folded tarpaulin and pulling the other half over them for cover against the growing cold. When they were all there, in a double line, feet to feet, the crippled trusty took the iron chain that ran the length of the tent and threaded it through the rings at the end of each man's leg iron. Then the chain was refastened to the tree stumps at each end of the tent.

Lying on the filthy canvas, Mayfield was conscious of the smell of it, the stink of unwashed bodies around him, of the instinctive shrinking of his flesh inside his clothes. Why? he thought. Which one of them is dirtier than I am, inside or out? What do I have a right to shrink away from now? And thought, with that curious twist of humor that had tormented him all his life, But does the mortified flesh always have to smell so badly? Would it do my soul more good if we hadn't been able to change the straw this afternoon?

The lanterns at each end of the tent gave only pale orange glows that faded swiftly into gloom. Most of the men were already asleep. Some snored but most lay utterly still, too exhausted for tossing or turning. On Mayfield's right the old man muttered some unintelligible words, moved slightly, and was still. On his left Joe Booker said, very softly, "Mr. David?"

"Yes?"

He felt Joe's hand touch his arm, move down it. "Here's a piece of rag, and a string. In the morning you wrap this rag around your leg iron, so it won't rub you raw. Then you tie that ring on the chain to your calf. If'n you don't, it'll drag and you'll keep stumbling over it."

"Thanks." He turned slightly, trying to see the Negro beside him. "You've never been on a chaingang, Joe."

"No sir. But I know folks that has."

"Yes." And thought, We were raised together. We've spent most of our lives together—and a world apart at the same time. "This afternoon when I started to ask to keep my own shoes, why did you stop me?"

"You seen what they did to that white man wanted to change."

"But I only wanted my own back. They could have kept theirs."

"They'll sell yours, Mr. David."

"I see."

And still there was no sense of fear. He could remember the sound of the gun butt striking Enod Parker, and he knew now the same thing might have happened to him. But he could not imagine the pain; it was as if that part of his mind was still blocked. What he felt was a great tenderness toward the Negro who had risked personal punishment to spare him. He said softly, "I don't know just how you got here, Joe; I don't even know why, except——" He stopped, trying to think of the words and aware that some things never could be put into words. After a moment he said, "Thanks, Joe."

"You still looking for whatever it is you got to find, Mr. David. I know that. And us got to stick together until you find it."

He told that to Miss Clara once, Mayfield thought: that I was looking for something and didn't know what it was, but I would be all right when I found it. And Miss Clara laughed; she wanted to know how anybody could find what they were

looking for if they didn't know what it was. And Cousin Elton said at least it damn sure wasn't a job, it wasn't work. But when Joe said it, it seemed to me for a moment that I almost knew what it was, or at least what he meant. And then it got away again.

The old man on Mayfield's right stirred wearily. "Trouble with my bladder," he mumbled. He tried to stand up. The chain around his ankle stopped him. He mumbled something, pushed back the canvas, and got to his feet in the semidark.

From outside the tent, outside the barbed-wire fence of the compound, came the flat, unemphatic sound of the rifle. The old man staggered; it might almost have been the ankle chain that stopped him, tripped him back upon the canvas. "My bladder . . ." he said, and then for a few moments made small bubbling sounds that dribbled into silence. From outside the compound the guard called, "Any more of you bastards planning to run?"

Under the tent, along the steel chain, there was no move, no sound. Then the guard's voice, querulous now, "And if you just want that pisscan, you better ask permission. There aint no way I can tell what you up to."

There was a half minute in which Mayfield lay as if stunned, neither understanding nor believing what had happened. Then cautiously he reached out and put his hand on the old man next to him. "Are you hurt?" he whispered, and felt blood, and his hand jerked backward without thought. He started to get up, to call for help; and Joe Booker's arm was across him, holding him, the Negro's mouth close against his ear saying, "Be still! Be still!"

And he was still, his right hand once more touching the old man. Where he touched him now there was no blood but another liquid, thin and warm, spreading for a few moments, and stopping, soaking the coarse cloth of the convict trousers, and on the cold air the smell of urine. Mayfield's hand was as motionless as the body beneath it. He told them he had bladder

trouble, he thought. He told them. And then, incongruously, I don't even know his name. I was chained to him most of the day, and I don't even know his name. Don't really know what he looked like, because I never really looked at him. Not any more than the guard looked to see who he shot, or could have seen in this light. Because it didn't matter. It could have been any one of us. It could have been me.

Panic seized him. I'll tell them in the morning! he thought. Tell them now, call the guard now, tell him there's been a mistake. I didn't mean to come here. I didn't know what I was getting into. Because it can't help Clytee now for me to be killed like an animal. It can't help anybody. I'll tell them . . . His mind stopped, brought up before the bleak wall of fact, remembering Howard Cason saying, "I can't help you now, even if you did change. It's too late."

CHAPTER 9

It had been on a February hunt the year before that David Mayfield first saw her. His father had come along that year, and old Mr. John Ellis, who with David's grandfather Marshall had bought this land twenty years before and built the camp, and Bartlett Collion, and his son Crowell.

It was almost dark. David and Mr. John Ellis and young Crowell were sitting on the front porch of Tom Mawson's house. The river, a hundred feet away, was barely visible through the oaks of the hammock. A faint mist, low over the water, seemed to have a gray luminosity of its own. The three horses were tied to a tree limb between the shack and the water; now and then the horns of a buck, fastened behind Mr. John Ellis' saddle, would be silhouetted against the mist; it would seem to float there, bodiless, detached, a set of ten-point horns against a gray sky of their own.

On the porch old Mr. Ellis and Tom Mawson sat hunkered down, one on each side of the steps, their backs against the beams supporting the roof. David and young Crowell sat between them on the top step, and between them was the jug. Mr. Ellis was saying, ". . . all day, and one buck between us. There's no game left in this country."

"That's shore the God's truth," Mawson said.

"It's all this goddamn turpentine and sawmilling," Mr. Ellis said. "If they keep it up, there won't be enough cover left in the whole country for a flock of blackbirds. I was down on the S'wannee yesterday. Looks like the seven plagues of Egypt passed through there all at one time."

"That's the God's truth," Mawson said. "And when they get through turpentine and sawmilling, then some cattleman sets hisself a little fire and burns off half the county, and there aint nothing left but stumps."

"There is still some pretty wild country around here," David said. He leaned forward and picked up the jug, hooking a finger in the ring at the neck, letting the jug rest across the crook of his bent elbow and tilting his whole arm upward to drink. The liquor burned like ice in the back of his mouth and throat, but was hot in his stomach.

"There's that little stretch your granddaddy and I bought," Mr. Ellis said. "Maybe a couple of thousand acres in the Whitman place. But less every year. Ivy Naval Stores has got just about everything south of here under lease, from what I hear."

Grinning, David said, "Maybe we ought to lease our little bit to them, Mr. John."

"I'll see them in hell first!" the old man cried. He knew David was teasing him, but the subject was too close to his heart for joking. "I got no grudge against a man clears land for farming. God made some land for farming, I reckon. But to cut down and burn off a forest from land that aint good for a whoop in hell except to raise trees for deer to run under——" He took a long breath. "Pass me that jug, son. One more drink and we better be getting on back to camp."

"There aint no hurry," Mawson said. And without turning his head yelled, "Clyteel Bring a lamp."

"I suppose people have to have turpentine," David said, still grinning. "At least Cousin Elton seems to think so."

"Your Cousin Elton," Mr. Ellis said, "is a man with one pocketbook for a brain and another one for a heart. He'd sell a lease on his own ass if there was any way to get turpentine out of it, or anything else somebody would pay money for. When your granddaddy was alive, David, that ten thousand acres he owned around Chatam Bend was some of the finest

deer and turkey country in Alabama or Florida. Now . . .” He raised the jug and took a pull at it.

Against the river mist David could see the horns of the buck move gently; they seemed to sway back and forth, from visibility into invisibility. I’m close to being drunk, he thought. I better watch it. He was always careful about his drinking when he was in a group. It was only when for some unknown reason he could no longer bear the presence of other persons and had to go into hiding like a wounded animal that the hard thirst came on him.

Mawson said, “I might take a little sip of that liquor you gentlemen done bought, if you don’t mind.”

“A man won’t drink his own liquor is not much advertisement for it,” David said, and passed the jug.

“One buck all day,” Mr. Ellis said. “How long has it been since you saw any bear around here, Tom?”

“Not long enough.” He put the jug down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “Back early this summer a old momma bear with a couple of cubs got into the mash at my still, and the three of ’em went on the goddamnedest drunk anybody ever seen around here. I’d been in Pinetree, taking in a little bit of liquor, and was coming home. It was just about this time of the day. And I was still a half mile away when I heard Clytee yelling. Goddamnedest yells you ever heard. I hit my old mule and got her running, but when we was right about out there where your horses are tied she turned around. One minute she was running this way, and next minute she was running the other way, and the wagon was wrapped around one of them trees and the shaft broke and I was half up in the tree and the mule was gone. And Clytee was still yelling, down under the tree now and trying to climb up. I tried to ask her what was wrong, but all she could yell was ‘Bears!’

“I had that old gun of mine in the back of the wagon. I got it and asked Clytee where was any bears. She pointed. ‘In the house?’ I said. ‘What the hell they doing in there?’ But she was

just about as scared as that old mule. So I took the gun and come up here on the porch and looked in.

"By God, there they was, all three of 'em, and drunk as a bunch of wild pigs. One of the cubs had his head stuck in a bucket and he was just walking round and round banging into the wall and table and chairs. I'd had me a little old barrel of lard on the back porch, and they'd brought that right in the house. One of the cubs was inside it; I reckon they all been inside it from the looks of them and the house; he was rolling it, with him and the lard spilling out together every now and then. And the old mamma bear was setting propped up against the wall right by the fireplace with a bucket of syrup in her lap. She'd put a pawful in her mouth, then she'd throw a pawful up in the air, just for the hell of it."

David began to laugh, a half-drunken, full-throated, whoop of laughter. Mawson said sourly, "I reckon it is kind of funny now. But it wont funny then." And yelled, "Clytee! Where's that lamp?"

"What did you do when you saw the bears?" Crowell asked.

"I killed 'em. Right where they was setting. A little blood wasn't going to mess things up no more'n they'd already done it."

A light moved beyond the dark doorway of the shack. Still laughing, Mayfield saw it brighten, saw a pair of bare feet beneath the faded hem on a dress. They were small feet with small ankles above them. He saw this much without actually noticing. Then he raised his eyes.

She stood in the doorway, holding the lamp shoulder high, the light of it full on her face. It was a strangely delicate face, almost doll-like; the mouth was small but full-lipped, the eyes were level and wide apart, very blue under a tangled mass of hair the color of cornsilk. She was smiling, not at any individual but simply into the lamplight which did not yet reach the men on the porch. There was something vaguely sensual about her face that every man there, even old Mr. Ellis, felt without

understanding; yet at the same time it was a little too empty, too childlike for adult beauty.

"Here's your lamp, Tom."

"Put it down."

She came forward and stooped and put the lamp on the porch floor. Now her face was on a level with that of Mayfield and young Crowell, and the light shone on both of them. She looked from one to the other, her smile unchanged. "Good evening."

Both young men stood up, the girl standing again at the same time. "Good evening," Mayfield said, his face still mirroring the laughter of a moment before, but changing. Young Crowell said, "Hello."

"Y'all having a good time. I heard you laughing."

Crowell said, "Tom was telling us about the time the bears got in your house."

Her face had an almost liquid quality: for an instant it was touched by fear at the memory of the bears, then by distress as she remembered the house, and then by laughter. "It was a time all right."

Without moving Mawson said, "Go on back in the house, Clytee."

She did not answer him. She looked at David, Crowell, old Mr. Ellis, then at David again. "It was nice to have met you," she said, and turned back into the dark house. A few moments later Mayfield saw the flicker of a match, the soft upswelling light of another lamp.

Old Mr. Ellis said, "Is that your wife, Tom? I heard you got married up in Georgia."

"Got her up to Marshallville," Mawson said.

"A very pretty girl," Mr. Ellis said. He stood up. "Let's get back to camp, boys. My backbone's beginning to rub my belly raw."

There was a half moon, clear and cold. The light barely penetrated the oaks of the hammock, but when that was behind them and they were in the pines again the moonlight came be-

tween the trees in pale columns. It lay on the ground like frost.

Young Crowell looked back to make sure Mawson was well out of hearing, then whistled. "By God, that was a good-looking girl! How do you reckon an old bastard like Tom ever married her?"

"Probably swapped her daddy five gallons of corn whiskey for her," Mr. Ellis said.

Mayfield said, "I'd have given him ten gallons myself, and thrown in a couple of bird dogs."

"To hell with her daddy," Crowell said. "He's out of the picture now. I wonder what Tom would take for her."

"Tom?" Mr. Ellis said. His voice had an odd note. "He——"

But Mayfield was still laughing. "You'd have to keep her out here in the woods until she grows up. She's not much more than a kid."

"A kid? With that figure? Then all I've got to say is, Oh you kid!"

"Don't tell me you'd take advantage of her," Mayfield said, joking. "She's probably stupid. She wouldn't even know what she was doing."

"Maybe she wouldn't," Crowell said. "But I'm damn sure I would."

"Not for long," Mr. Ellis said. He was riding a little ahead of the others and to the left. Now he turned in the saddle to look back at them. "Let me tell you young bucks something, in case you are getting any crazy ideas. You leave that girl alone. Because if Tom Mawson caught you with her, he'd kill you just exactly the way he killed those bears, right where you were sitting."

"You mean lying, don't you?" Crowell said. "At least I'd hope so, if I was going to get killed for it."

Mayfield laughed. "I'm not going to worry about it, Mr. John. She seemed a little young for my taste: mentally if not chronologically. There'd be no challenge."

He meant it. He had been aware of a certain sensuality in her face, but more aware of the childlike innocence that was there

also. He had felt no particular attraction toward her. And yet that night he dreamed of her. She was sitting naked on the side of an unmade bed. There was a lamp on a nearby table; the light from it was like liquid gold poured over her, and in it she sat smiling, but without any movement at all. She might almost have been a statue, until she said, "You can come in. Tom's gone hunting the other bear."

The room was in semidarkness except for the light of the lamp that somehow touched only on the girl and the bed behind her. In his dream Mayfield sensed more than saw the broken and overturned table and chairs, the smashed dishes, the dark liquid that dripped from walls and ceiling. And then he saw, even though there was only darkness around them, the bodies of the bears, the mother and the two cubs, lying dead between him and the bed. Looking at them, he said, "Tom killed them with just one shot each."

"Yes. But he's gone now. He's after the other one, the male."

"You're sure?"

"Does it matter?" Her smile had not changed, sensual and childlike above the golden body. "Does it really matter, David?"

"I don't know," he said. And now he could sense the thing in the doorway behind him, threatening and terrible and desirable. He did not know what it was but only that it was going to happen, violent, inevitable, and final, from out the darkness behind him. From somewhere, in memory perhaps, he heard old Mr. Ellis saying, "I told you Tom Mawson would kill you just the way he killed those bears. Now come on before he does."

But he could not turn. He could feel himself wavering, rocking forward, then back, and forward again while the thing in the darkness behind him came closer.

It was then he woke up, lying on his cot in the hunting camp, cold because his blanket had fallen off. He could hear Mr. John Ellis snoring. That was a hell of a dream, he thought, and found his blanket and pulled it over him.

CHAPTER 10

He did not dream of her again for a long while, did not even think of her. The hunt ended and he went back home to his old pursuits of doing nothing in particular: racing horses, fishing, gambling, going to parties, even going occasionally to his Cousin Elton's office, since he knew that Elton Marshall hated the sight of him. There he would ask questions, give a few consciously contradictory orders, tell a few jokes to upset the staff still more, and depart, leaving Marshall in a state of cold fury.

Then it was October. He came home at dusk one evening and heard his mother call him as he was going up the stairs.

Clara Mayfield was seated before the mirror in her dressing room, putting a pearl choker about her throat. Her dress was of white satin, cut square and low across the breast. Her hair, which had been blond when she was a girl, was not too much changed in color, thanks to very careful rinses. Her face was unlined, untouched by worries of any kind, and very pretty. As David came in the room she asked, without turning around, "Where in the world have you been?"

"Riding."

Now she could see his reflection in the mirror. His shirt was torn; there was a scratch across his left cheek; his red hair was wind-blown. He stood back of her grinning; he was a great deal like his father; but there was another quality also in his face, one she had never let herself ponder on, except to decide it represented a touch of wildness such as any young Southern gentleman of means might exhibit. "Riding?" she said, her

hands still at her throat, and looking at him in the mirror. "You look more like you had been fighting."

"No'm. I just fell off. Or rather the Lady fell with me, when I was trying to put her over a jump."

"What jump?"

"A fence, out at Henry Conser's."

"It must have been quite a fence if the Lady fell."

"It was."

For an instant there was a touch of fear in her eyes. "I declare, David, you are going to kill yourself one of these days. Why do you keep doing things like that? I don't understand, I just don't." The fear left her face, replaced by a mild frown. "Why do you pick people like Henry Conser to go around with, David?"

"I like him."

"There are better people you could like just as easily. Oh well . . ." She turned to face him. He was still grinning, and after a moment she said, "You know, darling, you are a very handsome boy. You really are."

He dropped a mock curtsy. "Thank you, Miss Clara. And a rather old 'boy' too. I'm twenty-eight."

"No!" She made a gesture that dismissed not only the subject of age, but age itself. Age would have frightened her, if she had ever allowed herself to think about it. That was one reason she had never allowed David to call her Mother.

"I am," he said, still smiling, knowing she hated the subject. "And twenty-nine before long."

"That's impossible. But one thing I do know: you're going to be late getting dressed. You've probably forgotten we are going to Judge Lindsey's."

His smile changed then. "Yes'm. I had forgotten."

"Well, hurry." But as he reached the door she said, "David?"

"Yes'm?"

"When are you and Laura going to be married?"

"What brought that on, Miss Clara?"

"You did. Twenty-eight? That means Laura is—well, you can't ask a girl to wait forever, darling. Mildred has been mentioning this to me of late. You know, not right out, but——"

"You've been mentioning it yourself. And right out." He could feel the resentment stiffening inside himself, a kind of anger which he was ashamed of at the same instant in which he felt it. Because he recognized the truth behind Miss Clara's words, while at the same time he was aware of the increasing pressure.

"It's all right for a young man to sow a few oats, David. Everyone expects that. It's best to do it and get it out of your system. I know." She smiled. "Your father wasn't absolutely an angel before I married him. But Laura must be"—she hesitated—"almost twenty-three."

"She's twenty-four, and almost twenty-five."

"I think we ought to have the formal engagement right away. Because there will have to be at least a few months after that before the wedding."

"Can't you leave it to Laura and me?"

"I don't understand you, David. It's not as if you didn't love her and want to marry her. You've always planned on that ever since you were a little boy."

Or had it planned for me, he thought. Since I was a little boy; since I was born maybe: before that: the way you and Miss Mildred planned it when you first decided you couldn't both marry Father.

But he said nothing. And Miss Clara said, "You and Laura talk about it tonight, darling. And decide on a definite date. Now hurry and get dressed."

He went to his room. He took off his shirt, his shoes, then sat without moving, the handsome, the almost beautiful face clouded and hard now beneath the tousled red hair. Since I was a little boy, he thought. Always planned for me, the way you'd plan to breed a bull. Only they aren't satisfied with just breeding; this has to be love too. "It's not as if you don't love

her." Have to love her, because that's been arranged too. For both of us. She has to love me and I have to love her. Because we were told to as children.

And neither of us has ever objected, he thought suddenly. Never had the courage to object. But how could we? When? Maybe Laura does love me. Maybe she thinks I love her. And I don't even know whether I do or not. I don't know what love is. I don't hate her. She's as trapped as I am, by her cowardice and mine. Or by just not knowing what is right? By Miss Clara's and Miss Mildred's determination to do what they think is right, what they think will make us happy because it will make them happy. Or who the hell knows? How can anyone know?

He began to sway as though caught in a physical wind. Resentment built in him, against his mother, Laura's mother, Laura, the world—and against himself. Especially himself. Because it was only himself that he could really despise.

He shuddered. The shudder ran through him like a chill. And he stood up quickly and went down the back stairs to the butler's pantry and poured three fingers of whiskey into a water glass.

The kitchen door opened and Joe Booker's mother stood there. She watched him take half the drink in one gulp. She noted the way he smiled at her before she said, "I reckon Judge Lindsey's going to give you 'bout all the liquor you need to drink before dinner, aint he?"

"This is just in case," Mayfield said. He started back up the stairs, the glass in his hand, then stopped and turned, grinning wildly back at her.

"Virginia, how hot do you suppose it gets in hell?"

"I don't know—and I hope I don't never find out. I hope you don't neither."

"Thanks."

"But I aint making no bets on it," she said, and went back into the kitchen.

She had raised David Mayfield along with her own son. She had nursed him as a baby: Miss Clara had refused to nurse the baby since this was bad for the figure. Virginia loved him in a way that included at least partial understanding. Maybe he done already found out about hell, she thought. At least he's done felt more of it while he's still alive than most folks.

"Laura's not feeling well tonight," Mildred Raymond told David. "But she insists I go on to the Judge's with Clara and Doyle. So you are going to have to give up the party and stay here and be nursemaid." She gave him a look from the corners of her eyes. "Though I don't suppose you'll mind that too much?"

"But if she's sick, shouldn't—"

"Not *really* sick, David. Just—indisposed. She had a tiny bit of fever this afternoon and I put her to bed. I tried to get word to Clara, to say I couldn't go tonight. But there wasn't anybody here to send except Maybelle, and she was busy; and anyway Laura kept insisting that I ought to go, that it would be good for me to get out. But she's afraid to stay alone." She turned her head so that she looked at him again from the corners of her eyes, the expression not quite coy, not quite overdone, but close to it. "Actually, I think she wants the chance to be with you alone. Not really alone, of course—Maybelle is here. She has some supper for you."

She was down the steps now, still talking. David went with her to the carriage where his father and mother waited. There the explanation of Laura's indisposition was run through again to Miss Clara's clucks of sympathy; it was still in progress when Doyle Mayfield said, "All right, Joe," and Joe Booker, who was driving, touched the horses with his whip.

David turned back toward the house. Laura's idea? he thought. Or Miss Mildred's? Hers and Miss Clara's together?

"You and Laura talk about it tonight, darling. And decide on a definite date." There wouldn't have been much opportunity for that kind of talk at Judge Lindsey's party.

A lamp burned in the parlor, but Laura was not there. For a full minute David stood in the doorway between hall and parlor, not moving, hearing his own breathing.

"David?"

"Yes?"

"I'm back here, David."

She was in bed, propped against a billowing wave of pillows. The lamp was not on the table beside her but halfway across the room so that the light from it touched her softly. She wore a robe of powder-blue silk, fastened high at the throat. Her black hair was piled in a mass on the pillow behind her and about her shoulders. Her face was oval with delicate features; her complexion was what her mother referred to as "peaches and cream," touched now with just the faintest bit of rouge at the cheeks. She was, David Mayfield thought in a completely impersonal way, a very beautiful woman; and he wondered why that beauty had never affected him as it did so many of the young men in Dothan County. Particularly Howard Cason.

He said, "You don't look sick, Laura. You look very pretty."

"Thank you. I'm not sick—not really. I did have a tiny bit of temperature, and Momma insisted I stay in bed. I told her I had just counted on going to the party, and I knew you had. I told her she could stay with me, or I could stay by myself. But she insisted."

One of them has to be lying, David thought. And both know I must know it. And thought, Except a gentleman isn't supposed to listen to what a lady says anyway, just to the sound of her saying it. Or maybe they are both telling the truth, since for both of them the truth is whatever they think it ought to be at the moment.

Laura was saying, "I told Momma that just because I had a

little bitty headache this afternoon was no reason to keep you from going to the party."

"It's an excellent reason to keep me from going. I didn't want to go anyway."

"Then you don't mind staying with me?"

"I love to stay with you," he said, because that was what he was supposed to say. "Is there anything you want, anything I can get for you?"

"You can get that frown off your face," she said petulantly. But then she was smiling again. "And you might go in the kitchen and tell Maybelle when you are going to want supper. I expect you'll want a drink before then. And you might bring me a little glass of sherry."

As he went into the kitchen Maybelle, the cook, said, "You and Miss Laura 'bout ready to eat, I hope."

"I was planning on a drink first. What have you got?"

"It's cold fried chicken, mostly. Nothing you couldn't get yo'self."

"You have somewhere you want to go, Maybelle?"

"Well, it's Wednesday. And it would be a pleasure to get to prayer meeting on time once in my life."

"Show me where things are, and run along. I can serve us."

"Yessir, I guess you can." She showed him the covered dishes, the trays already ready. And then, at the door now, she paused, looking back at him. "It aint like Miss Laura was a *young girl*."

Mayfield, about to set the decanter down, now added a little more liquor to his glass. "So I've been told before today."

"When y'all going to get married, Mr. David?"

"Shouldn't you ask her?"

"And have her crying on my shoulder again? She's done cried enough, Mr. David."

She was gone then. Mayfield stood looking at the closed door, then at the liquor decanter on the kitchen table. He put a little

more whiskey in his glass, added water, and took his glass and the sherry back to the bedroom.

"Maybelle wanted to go to prayer meeting tonight," he said.

"Oh! This is Wednesday, isn't it? I forgot."

"It's Wednesday. I told her to go ahead."

Smiling over her sherry, Laura said, "I don't know what Mother is going to say about this. A man in my bedroom, and no chaperone."

"I don't think she will be very surprised."

"Probably not."

"I think she knew it was Wednesday."

"What do you mean?"

"I think your mother and Miss Clara, and maybe Maybelle for all I know, meant for us to be left alone. Miss Clara has been at me for the last month: 'When are you and Laura going to get married? When? When?' Tonight I was practically ordered to set a date. Your mother hasn't said it right out, but she's hinted at it. We'll be expected to give them a date when they get back from the party tonight."

Laura's mouth began to tremble. "Well, I—I expect they do wonder. It's been . . . I mean, we . . ."

"You mean we have been semiofficially engaged all our lives. And now it's time to make honest women of our parents." The glass in his hand was empty now, though he had no memory of having drunk from it. He was looking at Laura, at her face gone slowly white. He felt no pity for her but only a tortured resentment of his own weakness in the face of the strength of his mother and Laura's mother and Laura and Maybelle and every other woman on the face of the earth. "Do you want to get married, Laura? Do you love me? I don't mean what your mother and Miss Clara have told you. I mean you, yourself."

The tears were spilling down her face now. "Of course I love you. I've always loved you. I don't know what you are talking about."

"How could you love me? What choice have you had?" He was like a man drowning, thrashing at the water around him. "How would you know? What is love? Can you smell it or feel it or taste it? How do you know?"

She did not answer but turned and buried her face among the pillows, weeping. He watched her, still without pity except for his own pain, for his own weakness, knowing as he had known all along that he was whipped. As to whether or not Laura loved him, he had only a sort of scientific curiosity: if she didn't, then he could feel sorry for her too as one of the defeated; if she did, then she would be having her own way eventually, and needed no pity.

"David?" Her face was still buried among the pillows.

"Yes?"

"Don't you love me at all?"

He knew what he was going to answer. Because there was no way to fight with a woman, a lady. A gentleman had to be polite; he had to say what he was supposed to say. That was why the struggle was so uneven. That was why he hated them, all of them. He said, "Of course I do, Laura." And then, trying for some measure of honesty, "It's just that I'm not sure what love is."

"I know I love you."

"You know you have been told you do."

"No." She turned, sitting up in the bed again. Tears were smeared across her cheeks but she was no longer crying. "Go get me another glass of sherry, David. Go on—I want a moment by myself."

When he returned with the sherry and another drink for himself she was inspecting her face in a mirror. The traces of tears were gone, but her eyes were still large from them. She put down the mirror and took the glass from him and drank the sherry as if it were medicine. "I need it, because I want to try to say something. And I don't know if I can." She smiled, a

little shakily. "Maybe you better take some of your drink too. Because I'm going to shock you."

"Shock me?"

"Yes." She put the glass on the table beside the bed. She was not leaning back against the pillows now but sitting straight upright. "You've known me all your life, David. Or almost all of it. All of my life. You've known me since I was a baby, since I was a little girl. And you think I still am a little girl. You haven't really *seen* me, looked at me in fifteen years. But I'm not a little girl any more, David. I'm a woman."

"A very beautiful one," he said automatically. He would have said it whether it were true or not.

"You don't know whether I'm beautiful or not. Because you haven't looked at me. You still haven't looked at me. Come here, David. Sit down on the side of the bed."

He sat down, the half-empty glass still in his hand. And he noticed now, for the first time, that her blue silk robe which had been fastened at the throat was partially open. Beneath it she wore a nightgown with lace about the neck, low cut so that above it he could see the swelling of her breasts. She sat with her head bent slightly forward, looking down at her hands, tightly folded in her lap. "You asked how I could know if I love you. I know the only way a woman can know." The clenched hands were very still but her voice trembled. "I know because I can feel it, David. Here." With both her hands she took one of his and put it against her breast.

Holding it there, she said, "What do I have to do to make you look at me, David? To make you see me the way I am now, not fifteen years ago? Do I have to take off my clothes and stand up in front of you naked to make you look at me? I'll do that too if I have to."

He did not move. He sat with his right hand on her breast, his left hand still holding the half-empty glass. But he was looking at her now: her head bent forward with the black hair falling loose about her shoulders, the curve of her throat, the

high swelling of her breasts. And his hand touching her began to tremble.

Her voice was little more than a whisper. "I know that you—like women, David. I've heard about you and those two Bartlett sisters who live over on the north side of town. And that place you go to in Mobile." She raised her head and looked at him. "I'm a woman too, David."

"Yes," he said. "Yes." His hand touching her breast moved of itself, gently. The primitive animal heat began to glow in his groin; yet almost at the same moment there was a dark flash of something close to revulsion, as though what lay ahead of him was incestuous on his part if not on hers; and still in that same instant he felt, for the first time in his life, a tremendous pity for her; so that when his hand moved again, avoiding the gown now, onto bare flesh, it was moved as much by pity, by his ingrained inability to deny a female of his own class or to insult her, as it was by desire.

"David," she said. She put her arms around him, pulling him down against her. His mouth was on hers, his hands worked at the bedcovers. And it was then, with a flash of hatred in the dark back corners of his mind he thought, It's what they wanted, planned. So I'll have to marry her now, can't leave her now. And then thought, I'd have to marry her anyway.

Because now it was too late.

Yet the thought persisted; and when she said, lying quite still now, "Do you believe me now, David? Do you believe now I truly love you?" he said, "Of course, darling," because that was what had to be said. But he thought, Her own mother, Miss Clara, Maybelle, Laura, all of them, planning it. Because now I can't run, or even stall any more. Now we have to set a date for them tonight. Only they wouldn't, he thought, couldn't have planned it. Not deliberately. Not her own mother. Not Laura. Not deliberately. Except how do I know, how can I know what Laura or her mother or Miss Clara or any woman is capable of?

The one thing he could be sure of was, on his part at least, there had been no love in the act. And no passion on hers. And little or no satisfaction on either. She had accepted him, but without response, giving him herself as she might have given a Christmas present to a Negro servant, taking nothing in return.

They were sitting in the parlor, Laura with her robe fastened at the throat and bundled in an eiderdown quilt, when Mrs. Raymond and Miss Clara and Doyle Mayfield arrived. Laura told them she and David had decided to get married soon, within the next few weeks anyway. Mrs. Raymond wept, apparently overwhelmed by complete surprise; Miss Clara said it was about time. Together they decided it would take a week to arrange the engagement party, and Mrs. Raymond pointed out that after the party there would be no need for a long formal engagement, since everyone in the county knew they had been practically the same as engaged for years anyway.

David Mayfield rode home with his family. He kissed Miss Clara good night and went to his own room. For perhaps fifteen minutes he sat there, not moving, not even thinking now, his stillness almost cataleptic. Then—it was still without conscious thought—he began to pace back and forth across the room. As he did feeling began to return, an overwhelming disgust with himself and the world. He went out and down the back stairs and out of the house.

CHAPTER 11

The bootlegger was a round, normally good-natured man named Roberts. In midafternoon he approached the Mayfield home from the back and after tying his horse to a fence post proceeded cautiously until he located Joe Booker in the barn. "There you are," he said, breathing heavily. "I been looking for you. I didn't want to see Mr. Mayfield. And the Lord knows I didn't want to see her."

"Mr. David's at your place?" Booker asked.

"He's in the barn again, up in the hayloft, with a gallon of liquor. And smoking a pipe. It's God's wonder he aint burned the place down. Maybe he has by now."

"He don't usually smoke much."

"It aint going to take much smoking to set that hay on fire. Come on."

"Yessir." Joe began to saddle the horse he had been currying. "I was going to come out there this evening. I figured he must be there, since I already been to Mr. Eddie Barker's and Mr. Allen's."

"He come last night, late. I knowed when I seen him he was getting set for another of those times; so I figured I'd get him on his horse and point him away from my place before he settled down. Only it aint worked. I got him on the horse all right; but when I went out this morning, there it was again. And when I found him all he'd say was if I didn't get the hell away and leave him alone he'd shoot the top of my head off."

"Mr. David won't shoot nobody."

"Maybe not." They had left the barn now; Roberts untied his horse and struggled heavily into the saddle. "Only if he does shoot anybody, I'd a heap rather it was you than me."

"Mr. David aint never hurt nobody, except hisself."

"Sure. When he's sober, or drinking with the fellows and just a little wild, he's as nice a man as you'd want. There aint nothing stuck-up about him. But when he decides he's gonna hole up and get sure 'nuff drunk, then I just as soon he done it some place other'n my barn." He turned to look at Booker. "And it aint just that he's apt to burn the barn down, which God knows aint worth much. I reckon he's done already more'n paid me for that. But if he did burn it, there's a mighty good chance he'd burn with it. Seems to me that, even drunk as he is, he'd know that."

"Maybe he does."

"What?" Roberts said. His round face turned again toward the Negro. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. . . . Only sometimes it looks to me like Mr. David is almost trying to destroy hisself."

"I don't know if he's trying," Roberts said. "But I got a idea one of these days he's going to manage it, try or not. And in my barn, if we don't get him out of there."

"I'll get him."

When they reached the barn Booker dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to Roberts. "I'll get him," he said again, and went inside.

Sunlight came in yellow streaks through the broken and warped walls. The earth floor was splotched with manure. There was the smell of manure and urine and unwashed animals, and as Joe Booker began to climb toward the loft, there was the lighter, clean smell of dry hay. A band of sunlight spanned the hole in the loft floor, and through this motes swirled like insects.

"You put your head through that hole," David Mayfield's voice said, "and I'm going to shoot it off."

Joe Booker did not stop climbing. "It's Joe, Mr. David." One hand, the other, his head and shoulders cleared the loft floor. Then he was standing upright, the band of sunlight across his knees, his body in the gloom above it. At first he could see nothing except the yellow streaks of sunlight, the general outline of the loft, the piled hay. Then he saw Mayfield, half buried in the hay. The jug with its corncob stopper lay beside him. "I thought you were that son of a bitch Roberts," he said, his voice only a little thick.

"Mr. Roberts is scared you going to burn his barn down."

"I wouldn't burn it. Most comfortable goddamn hay in Dothan County. Here." He picked up the jug. "Have a drink."

Joe Booker appeared to drink more than he did. He lowered the jug, wiped its mouth very carefully with the palm of his hand, and replaced the stopper. Still holding the jug, he said, "If we take this over to my house, Momma'll give us something to eat."

"I don't want anything to eat."

"No sir. But you going to before long."

"You know what I want, Joe? I want to go bear hunting down at the Florida camp. I been lying here dreaming about it."

"There aint hardly any bears down there any more."

"Tom Mawson killed three of them, with three shots." He stood up, the hay rattling around him. He said, "You hold onto that jug, Joe. We're going bear hunting."

"You got to be back here next week, Mr. David, for your engagement party. I heard Miss Clara talking about it."

"I know." His voice was suddenly, completely, sober. "I'll be back. I always come back, don't I? Sometimes I breathe out, but then I breathe in again, and there I am. There's no way to keep from it." He swayed. "But at least I can go hunting in the meanwhile."

He was at the camp. He did not know the day of the week or even the time of the day, whether it was going from daylight into dark, or from darkness into daylight. Then it was dark and he and Joe Booker were sitting on the porch, the jug between them. It was cold and there was a quilt over David's shoulders. No frogs cried in the swamp, but somewhere a night heron made strange noises.

Mayfield said, "I don't have to go back yet, do I, Joe?" It was the first time he had spoken in a long while.

"We got a few days yet."

"That's right. We just got here, didn't we?"

"This afternoon."

"That's good."

Then he was in bed. He put out his left hand and felt the jug on the floor beside him, and knowing it was there went back to sleep. And now the girl was sitting naked on the side of the bed again, her yellow hair over her shoulders and the lamplight golden on her body and the darkness all around her, though even in the dark he could see the dead bears, the mother sitting upright against the wall to his left, the two cubs on the floor to the right as he went slowly between them, between the bloodstains around them, moving slowly toward the girl on the bed at the same time the thing in the blackness behind him grew larger, more threatening, and he knew without even turning his head, without having heard any sound at all, that it was Tom Mawson holding the rifle with which he had shot the bears, Mawson waiting for him to become a little more visible in the yellow lamplight.

That was all. Perhaps he awoke. His hand found the jug and he drank from it and lay back.

Now it was daylight. He ate breakfast and Joe Booker thought, He aint drinking heavy as usual. Maybe he's already sobering up; until Mayfield said, "I'm going to ride over to Tom Mawson's this morning and get some of his liquor."

"We still got a right smart."

"I want to try his."

"I'll saddle the horses."

"Just one," Mayfield said. "I want to go by myself." And then, "I'm all right. I'll be back."

He would never remember the ride. He was in that state of drunkenness where the body seemed completely sober, steady, while the mind was detached, suspended somewhere in gray space. He was on the front porch of the hunting camp; then he was tying his horse to the tree in Tom Mawson's yard. A half-dozen dogs yelped around his ankles while he walked quite steadily, though with a sense of floating, of being transported almost instantly from one place to another, past the dogs and up the steps to the cabin.

The girl appeared in the doorway. It was exactly as it had been that other time except now it was not the yellow light of a lamp flowing up across her face but the clear, tenuous, unsubstantial sunlight of early morning level against her. "Why, hello," she said. "We aint seen you in a long time. Tom aint here this morning."

He had not even looked, not even paused to wonder. He said, "I didn't come to see Tom."

"Well, I reckon I can sell you a little liquor. Except there aint but a little here. He don't keep much around the house."

She turned and he followed her inside. When from under the bed she produced the quart fruit jar, the liquor clear as spring water, beaded about the rim with tiny bubbles, he said, "Get us a couple of glasses. We'll have a drink together."

Her yellow hair was done loosely against the back of her neck. A strand of it fell across her left shoulder. She said "Thank you kindly. I aint much of a hand for drinking."

"You'll have one with me? Please." He was smiling, bending a little toward her, a very handsome, very graceful, almost beautiful young man despite his bulk. She had never seen a man so handsome. She felt strangely drawn toward him, aware of him physically and at the same time of an odd tenderness

such as she might have felt for an injured animal. She did not try to analyze this; she was rarely troubled by mental considerations of any kind.

"You want me to take a drink with you, honest?"

"It would make me very happy."

There were two things she said that he would remember later, like fragments of a dream most of which is forgotten. He had his arms around her, his hands fumbling at the buttons along the back of her dress, when she said, "I'm scared. Tom would kill me if he caught us."

"No," Mayfield said. "He might shoot me. He might shoot me like he did those bears. But he wouldn't hurt you."

And a moment later, "Do you really want me to? I mean would it make you feel better? Would it make you happy?"

At the time he scarcely heard her, paid no attention. He was far too intent upon himself, upon what he had to do and what to destroy, the woman no more than an instrument, her whisperings those of a pretty but stupid female, the wife of a backwoods moonshiner being willingly seduced. It was only later he would recall in a different light what she had said.

After four days he was back home in Alabama, a little shaky but sober and completely recovered by the time of his engagement party. At the party there was no announcement of the wedding date, and it was three days later Laura told him she and her mother had not yet decided on a definite date, but it would probably be sometime in April.

"Oh . . ." he said. There had been no intimacy between them since he came back from his "hunting trip." In the general hurry surrounding the party there was little time for privacy, and neither of them sought to create more. David had wondered if the wedding would be rushed, if there was a need to rush it. The thought had preyed on him, but he had not been able to bring himself to ask. Now (they were in the parlor of Laura's home) he said awkwardly, "April? That's—I mean . . . You don't want it sooner?"

She looked at him, and away. "There's no need to hurry, David. And there are so many people who want to give us parties. I don't see how we can make it earlier."

For several weeks Mayfield got through the parties. He was, apparently, the ideal prospective young groom: handsome and charming and happy and rich. Yet from the moment he learned Laura was not pregnant and the wedding was still indefinitely in the future, his dream of Clytee and the dead bears and the threat hidden in darkness began to return, only slightly altered. Now that he had been inside the cabin his mind furnished details not pictured before. Now the room was still wrapped in darkness except for the lamplight on the girl, but even in the darkness he could see besides the dead bears the exact bits of broken and dirty furniture with which he was now familiar: the two chairs, one with a rocker broken at the tip, the scarred table, the wood-burning stove, the bed itself with the cornshuck mattress that could be noisy as a small hurricane, so noisy it could drown out any sound from the darkness at the doorway.

At Miss Clara's New Year's party he drank more than usual. Afterward he drove Laura home. He had the impression that she wanted to talk with him about something, to talk seriously, and he deliberately pretended to be drunker than he was. From her house he drove directly to Roberts', the moonshiner's. Two days later he and Joe Booker were once more at the hunting camp in Florida. The next morning he was at Tom Mawson's tying his horse to the tree, the dogs yelping around him, when Mawson said, "You back down here pretty quick this time, aint you?"

Mayfield had not seen him as he rode up. Now he stood on the unpainted porch of the cabin, a lean dark man in dirty overalls and dirty blue shirt and high-topped, unlaced shoes. The rifle leaned against the wall behind him. He said, "Mr. John and the others come down with you this time, or you by yourself again?"

"Just Joe. I thought I'd do some fishing."

"The fishing aint too good this time the year."

Mayfield laughed. "Hell, as long as your liquor lasts, I won't care one way or the other."

This time he did not get in the house but waited in the yard at Mawson's direction until the whiskey was brought to him. There was no sign of the girl. Counting out the money, he asked, "How is Mrs. Mawson these days?"

The moonshiner took a step backward. "How come you ask?"

"Out of politeness. Shouldn't I?"

It was then he saw her for just an instant, standing in the doorway looking out at him, and gone again as Tom Mawson said, "Clytee aint much for strangers."

But he was still driven by something he could neither understand nor control. He laughed. "I don't blame you for hiding her. As pretty as she is you're likely to have strangers hanging around, even out here in the woods. Hell, I'd be likely to hang around myself, if I thought it would do me any good." He uncorked the jug. "Have one with me?"

"You paid for it," Mawson said. "I don't want none. Take it and go on."

He drank and wiped his mouth and recorked the jug. Then (he would remember it only as if it had all happened in the instant of turning) he was back at the camp, in the late afternoon, and Clytee was there too, materializing in the sunlit rectangle of doorway and moving forward into the room, saying, "Tom's done gone to Pinetree. But you got to stay away from the house. If he had any idea 'bout us he'd kill me sure."

His laughter had a slightly crazy sound. "Tom wouldn't hurt you. Not you." He had his arms around her; he kissed her at the junction of throat and shoulder. "Me. He might shoot me. I had an idea he was going to this morning."

"He's mean."

"Forget him."

During the next few days David Mayfield lived in a state of suspended drunkenness in which he could walk and talk almost as if he were sober, but in which his mind seemed to have no contact with his body and in which time had no continuity, a kaleidoscope of pictures that could flash backward as easily as forward, so that memory and current actuality were blurred: He was sitting on the front porch of the camp with the moon swinging weirdly through the trees and his voice saying, "To die, to sleep, no more. A consummation devoutly to be wished. Might his own quietus make with a bare bodkin." And Joe Booker, "Don't talk like that, Mr. David." "Why? Because I misquote?" Remembering when he was sixteen, seventeen maybe, standing on the bank of a flooded creek, thinking, If I don't go back home? If I just take one step forward and wait and . . . And I'd just swim back out, wet and muddy; and the sound of his crazy laughter at the imagined picture of himself. And then, back at the camp again, running the trotline with Joe, looking down at the water, quoting, "'A single step, and all is o'er, a plunge, a bubble, and no more.'" And Joe, "You got to stop that, Mr. David." And he, "I always talk about suicide when I'm drinking, Joe. You know that. But I'm not going to do anything about it. All I have the courage to do is read about it. 'Then must it be an awful thing to die; more horrid yet to die by one's own hand.'" And Joe, "How you like this catfish, Mr. David? This old bullhead mus' weigh twenty pounds."

Yet at the same time something else was happening to him. Usually now he had no memory of the preceding day or even the preceding hour; yet when Clytee told him once to meet her the next day at a certain hour in a certain part of the woods he was there, without knowledge of how he got there. And when she came to the camp (this was her third and last visit) he was standing outside in the gathering dusk, waiting for her, vaguely aware of an anticipation that was not confined to

sex, of a strange sense of something akin to tenderness, to love itself.

They went inside. There was only the one big room. He made a pallet of quilts before the open fire. It was cold and when he began to remove her clothing she said, "Wait until I get a little warmer. Besides, I got something to tell you."

"All right." His hand moved gently. "What is it?"

He was not really interested in the details of what she had to say, and only half listened. There had been enough conversation between them now for him to know her talk was not likely to require close attention: it reflected a nature essentially kind and generous, but also a mind little better than moronic. She had been both flattered and physically, emotionally, moved by Mayfield's good looks, his virility, his expensive clothing, the compliments he could pay her without even being aware of what he said, by the fact that he was socially "above" her as though he had come from another world. Yet at the same time, out of some simple instinct, she felt sorry for him—the first white person who ever had. She knew he suffered. She did not know how or why, and did not try to understand. The fact that he suffered was enough; she wanted to protect and comfort him. And the love-making was one way of giving comfort. "You like it, don't you?" she said more than once, pleased that she had pleased him. "When we do this you forget everything else, don't you? You are happy." Yet once the actual love-making began she became completely physical, animal, without mental reservations. It was a kind of love-making David Mayfield had never known before, just as he had never before known sympathy from any woman except the Negro who had nursed him as a baby and occasionally whipped him as a child, showing him no preference to her own son except that she whipped the white child first. So that now, in the strange, whiskey-blurred world where he existed, he was aware both of Clytee's passion and of her sympathy. Sometimes when the love-making was over he would nuzzle against her breast like a child and go

quickly to sleep, not only physically exhausted but momentarily at peace.

Now on the pallet before the fire he listened with only half his mind until some fragment of what she was saying reached him. "What did you say, sugar?"

"You got to take me with you. You got to."

"Take you with me? Where?"

"I declare. Sometimes I think you must be deaf, or crazy. You can't be that drunk or you wouldn't be able to do nothing else." She giggled. "And I never been with you when you couldn't do something else. That's what got me in this here trouble."

His hand had stopped moving. "What are you talking about?"

"I done told you. I'm going to have a baby. And I got to get away from down here 'fore Tom finds it out. He'll kill me."

"Not if it's his baby, and it must be. Hell, it's got to be. There hasn't been time—"

"Aint you heard nothing I told you? Tom can't have no babies. He can't do no good at all. Maybe that's what makes him so mean jealous."

He was sitting up now, not touching her but staring at her. The idea that Laura might have been pregnant had haunted him until he learned different; yet it had never occurred to him about Clytee, certainly not the thought that she might demand any more of him than money. If she were going to have a baby, then it had to be her husband's, or some other man's, not his.

"You couldn't," he said. "It hasn't been more than—than two months since the first time. Even if you were, you couldn't know it yet."

"I know all right. I had a baby once up in Georgia, 'fore I married Tom. I can tell."

"All right. Then you can go back to Georgia to have this one." He had the money in his hands without knowing he had moved. But strangely she was weeping now, now shouting at

him, turning into a person he had no awareness of having seen before, alternately sobbing and screaming that she couldn't travel alone, she didn't know how, she had never been anywhere by herself. She did not mention marriage; it had not occurred to her in connection with David Mayfield. But Mayfield believed that was what she meant. He was staring at her with hatred, the jug in his hand, the money scattered about the floor. Laura, her mother, Miss Clara, Maybelle, he thought; now this one, all of them, all alike.

The liquor was like ice in his mouth and across his chin and throat and chest. "All right," he said. "So he'll kill you or you'll kill yourself first. All right." He was holding the pistol toward her. "Go ahead. Or maybe you rather shoot me. Shoot us both." He swayed, and she was gone, the pistol gone. He stood there. It might have been a split instant; it might have been an hour; he had no idea, cataleptic almost, looking at nothing. Then he heard the shot and after that Joe Booker's voice calling. And now he had moved again; he was outside and the moon pitched drunkenly through the trees and was still, shining down on the girl lying in the dew-wet and frosted grass, not thinking, standing in that semicataleptic state for what might have been hours, might have been only a few moments before someone spoke to him from the darkness and he said still without moving, "I killed her." And then (still without consciousness of time though he was in the jail now, alone, sitting with his forearms resting across his knees, head bent forward, speaking to himself now, without sound) I was the one wanted to die. And killed her instead.

CHAPTER 12

He awoke, amazed at the fact that he had slept even before he was aware of the iron clanging that had awakened him, and aware in the same instant of the body of the old man beside him and of the cold. It was more than the cold of air and damp earth; it was as if a special kind of cold oozed from the body next to him, permeant through his own flesh and bone so that at first he could not even shiver. He lay motionless, hearing the iron clanging on the cold air, a voice somewhere shouting, "Rise and shine, you sons of bitches!" the soft, animal stirring of the men around him, the cold creaking of canvas against hay. I slept, he thought in slow amazement. A trembling began to pass through his muscles.

"Mr. David," Joe Booker said softly. "It's all right, Mr. David."

"Yes," Mayfield said.

The lanterns still burned at each end of the tent but beyond them was solid darkness. Then torches moved against the dark; a man—a guard, since he did not wear the black and white stripes of a convict—moved down the tent, drawing the chain to which they had all been strung during the night. Slowly the convicts began to rise; but as Mayfield started to rise with them he realized, abruptly, that not one of the men had stood upright. The scene in the tent was more like that of a group of animals than men, like pigs disturbed in a wallow, four-legged creatures seeming to rise one end at a time, hunched over, deformed, straw-littered against the pale glow of the lanterns.

"Mr. David," Joe said, "you better wrap your ankle iron. And tie up that ring."

So that's what the others were doing, Mayfield thought. But when he stooped he found his face was directly above that of the dead man. The old man's eyes were open but rolled back in his skull, only the whites showing. The mouth was open, a thin trickle of dried blood running from one corner down across the chin. The face itself was like something made of cardboard. Mayfield could not even remember having seen it, only the sound of the cracked voice saying, "You young fellows can hold it all day, but I got bladder trouble."

He shivered and turned away. With his back to the corpse he stooped and wrapped the rag Joe Booker had given him about the iron ring on his ankle, tied the short chain up against the calf of his leg.

Mac, the cripple trusty, said, "All right. You two such buddies, you can carry the pisscan."

"What?" Mayfield asked. But Joe Booker had already said, "Yessir," and then, "Come on Mr. David."

"Oh. Sure," Mayfield said, and thought, My mind still isn't working properly. I hear words but it takes awhile for them to soak in and have meaning.

"Wait," Mac said.

The guard who had removed the tent chain was back now. He stooped over the body of the old man, pulled open the shirt, a gesture as casual as if he had been inspecting a tomato to see if it was ready for picking. "Hold that flare down here," he said to Mac. And then, "He's dead all right. Take him out and bury him."

"Yessir."

Two convicts carried the body. Mayfield and Joe Booker followed, the can between them, then came the trusty holding his torch of burning pine. At the compound fence the gate was opened by a guard. They went through. "Down that way," the guard said. He followed them: the convicts in front carrying

the body, Mayfield and Booker with the five-gallon can, Mac close behind them with the torch, the armed guard a few steps behind. Somewhere a dog was barking against the cold darkness. "Done treed him a coon," the guard said. No one else spoke.

"All right," the guard said. They had gone perhaps two hundred yards. There was a pine tree, turpentine-scarred, and beside this a small shack. From the shack, the trusty brought shovels. The men began to dig.

"You mean you digging two holes?" the guard said. "It aint going to hurt him now to empty that pisscan in with him." No one answered. "If you miss your breakfast it's your own goddamn fault," the guard said.

Mayfield and Booker emptied the contents of the can into the hole they had dug, covered it again. The other convicts were still digging a few feet away. Mayfield and Booker joined them. A few minutes later the guard said, "Hell, that's deep enough. Let's get it over with."

One of the convicts turned then. He was a small man, ageless, his skin yellow in the light of the flare. He took off his cap before he spoke. "We don't bury him deeper'n this, mister, the coons will dig him up sure. We don't mind if we miss breakfast."

"Maybe you done et so well you don't need any breakfast," the guard said. "I aint." But his tone was querulous rather than angry.

"We'll get back for breakfast," the little man said and turned, digging fast now, his cap still in his hand.

A few minutes later the guard said, "Well, that's deep enough, damn it. Strip him, and put him in." None of the convicts moved. "Goddamnit," the guard said. "Clothes aint going to do him any good now. Mac."

"Yessir. Here." Mac handed the flare to the little man and bent and stripped shirt and trousers and shoes from the body. It lay naked then, pitifully small, scrawny, the ancient flesh

sagging between the ribs, the dark splotch of pubic hair, the legs thin and sharp-boned. Instinctively the little man holding the flare stepped back, moving so that his own shadow fell across the body as if to protect it. But the light still touched on the iron band around the ankle and the short length of chain and the ring fastened to it. *Till death do us part*, Mayfield thought. *With this ring I . . .*

"All right," Mac said. He and another convict lifted the body and put it in the shallow grave. "Let's get him covered."

"Wait," the little man said. From his pocket he produced a bit of rag. He gave the flare back to Mac, then getting on hands and knees placed the rag over the dead man's face.

They were covering the body when Mayfield noticed that he was working with his cap in his hand, though he had no memory of having removed it. So were the others. Even the guard held his hat in his hand now. Maybe the same one who killed him, Mayfield thought. Killed him for standing up, without even knowing who he was, without even knowing if he had killed him.

"We aint buried him deep enough," the little man whispered. "Varmits will get at him sure."

Breakfast came in the same bucket as last night's supper: two small squares of cornbread with syrup, two pieces of fried fatback, a cup of bitter coffee. But it's better than last night's supper, Mayfield thought, eating out of desperation, aware of the taste but eating anyway, thinking that after what he had just seen he should not be hungry, should never be hungry again. But he was hungry anyway, was still hungry when he finished.

A voice yelled, "Squad chains!" and the convicts, moving like poorly trained animals, began to form ragged lines. Flares were increasing in number. By their light the armed guards

circling the compound fence were barely visible. An unarmed guard inside the compound took Mayfield's arm and swung him around to peer into his face. "Yeah, you the one. You get on the number six chain, over there."

He lined up with the others, finding Joe Booker beside him. They were handcuffed along with four others, each man by his left hand, to a short length of chain which had a large ring at each end. A trusty with a burning flare took his place at each end of the line.

Mayfield's was the last line of convicts to reach the compound gate. Already the other squads were moving away at the same slow trot with which they had come the night before, a river of black and soiled white between the banks of flickering torches. Overhead the sky was still black, punctured with stars. Behind the chained line of men a voice said, "Rayford!"

The man at the gate said, "I reckon these here are mine, Eddie?" He was a huge man, bearded as they all were. That was all Mayfield could tell in this light.

"With a couple of new ones," the voice behind the squad said. "Old Daddy and Lickskillet working with Tom today. You got that crazy newcock come in from Pinetree yesterday along with his nigger buddy. Cap'n Ryan's orders."

The guard looked down the line with interest, his gaze stopping at Mayfield. "Well, so that's him. What'd the Cap'n give him to me for?"

"I don't know. Start him off easy maybe."

"Sure," Rayford said, and laughed. Then to the line in general, saying it in his normal speaking voice, "Let's get going."

They began to trot. Mayfield found the gait awkward. It was not really a run, but it was certainly more than a walk. If he tried to lengthen his stride, he found he was getting ahead of the others and being jerked back. When he tried to move at a rapid walk he could not keep up.

The right shoe, which was too large, began to rub at toe and heel. At first it was merely uncomfortable, then it became

actual pain. He began to limp, trying to put the right foot down squarely and lift it straight so it would not slide inside the shoe. This made his running more awkward.

They'll stop in a minute, he thought. Walk anyway. I can't run much longer. But the lights of the squads ahead did not slow, and soon he was not looking at them any more, not thinking about them, but just about himself, the growing pain in his chest, the fire in his throat. "I—I've got to slow down," he said. But there was no one heard him. He tried again, and found he could make almost no sound.

He stopped running. And instantly he was snatched forward by his wrist fastened to the squad chain. He lost his balance and fell. The men at each end of the chain swung ahead, pulled almost together. Mayfield was dragged several yards. Then he was on his feet again, staggering. Joe Booker was saying something close against his side, but he could not understand the words.

They were walking. For a while, head down, gasping for breath, he thought the guard had stopped them, letting the other squads go ahead. Then he realized the others too were walking. But almost as soon as he was aware of this they began to trot again, his own squad with them.

There were trees on each side of them now, the road a sand trail between walls of blackness. Perhaps there was a sky overhead; he did not know, could not look up. But we've got to be almost to where we are going, he thought. And again, Almost there. Must be. After that he quit thinking, only dully aware of the pain in his right foot and that the ankle chain which he had tied above the calf of his leg had come undone and was dragging. He tripped on it and fell, and was on his feet again, and fell again.

He did not hear the guard say, "All right, y'all walk a minute now. Keep dragging this newcock, you all be too wore out to get any work done." But he found he was walking, breath-

ing a little easier, and the lights of the other squads were far ahead.

As the pain in his chest decreased so that he could become conscious of other things, the pain in his right foot and ankle increased. Somewhere he had lost the rag around his ankle shackle; the shackle had rubbed the ankle raw and he could feel blood seeping from this down his foot. The foot had a fire of its own which the blood did not quench. It was almost as hard now to walk as it had been to run.

Behind them the guard said, "Get started. Them other squads'll think we're lost." Once more the line moved forward at a trot.

Mayfield was scarcely conscious now. He stumbled against the men to right and left of him. He heard them curse him without any idea of what they said. He stumbled and fell, and fell again. Once he realized that his free arm had been pulled around Joe Booker's shoulders, and some detached part of his mind thought, Joe can't carry me. He's not as big as I am, no more used to this. . . .

He was lying on the ground, still chained, the rest of the squad sprawled about him. The trusties sat on either side, their burning pine torches stuck in the sand. The guard was hunkered down on his heels, country fashion, fifteen feet away, his rifle across his thighs. "Good thing for you newcocks," he said pleasantly, "the Cap'n got us working this crop of trees, and we aint got to go on another couple of miles. Probably had to drug both of you by then."

One of the convicts said, "Jesus! It's cold." And another, "It's gonna be colder tonight. That wind's just starting."

Mayfield heard the words without understanding them. He was trying to get air through a throat that felt as though it had been scalded into lungs that were on the point of bursting. Then, once more as the pain in throat and chest eased, the pain in foot and ankle resumed. He sat up and moved his

trouser leg to look at where the shackle had rubbed his leg raw.

"Well," the guard said. "No wonder you was having so much trouble. Your leg iron aint wrapped, and your chain's loose. Didn't nobody show you how to take care of that?"

Mayfield started to answer, and found it was still almost impossible for him to speak. Apparently the guard did not expect an answer. From his pocket he produced a bit of rag and tossed it to the prisoner on Mayfield's left. "Show him how to fix that leg iron, Bass."

The prisoner Bass did not speak, but his movements were obviously expert, contorting his body, pulling the man next to him so that he could reach Mayfield's ankle with both hands, wrapping the shackle. The touch of the rough cloth on raw flesh hurt, and Mayfield's leg jerked instinctively. Then he held it steady.

"Thanks," he said. His voice was still thick. Bass merely looked at him, a long, straight, curious look, then sat back. A moment later he took a convict's cloth cap from beneath his jacket and gave it to Mayfield. "You dropped it."

"Oh. . . . Thanks again." But as he took it he noticed that Bass did not wear a cap. He was the only one in the squad who didn't. "You don't have one," Mayfield said. "Are you sure—?"

"I don't wear them."

"Mr. Bass don't like caps," the guard said, and chuckled. He stood up, looming huge above them. Mayfield had not realized before how big he was, gaunt but huge in the shoulders so that he seemed almost deformed. "I guess it's just about daylight." He tossed a set of keys to one of the trusties, a Negro. "Turn 'em loose, Reverend."

There was no sun but a pale gray light that seemed to come more from wisps of fog than from the sky; it seemed to lie in a small pool around them leaving the rest of the earth in darkness. Out of it the pine trees rose huge and dark toward the

sky. A few feet away stood a wagon body with no animals hitched to it. In single file the released convicts went to it. Here each one got a drink of water from a barrel in the wagon, then picked up a tool of some sort.

The water was icy cold. Don't drink too much all at once, Mayfield thought, controlling the impulse to gulp. His hand holding the dipper shook.

Behind him the guard said, "We aint got all day."

He swallowed quickly, and immediately the water felt like a rock in his stomach. From the wagon bed he took a tool such as the other men had got. "I take one of these?" he asked.

"Why, yes," the guard said. "I reckon the Cap'n's going to want you to do a little work." And then, noticing the way Mayfield held it, "That's a hack. You never seen one before?"

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"Well, I reckon you'll see plenty of 'em for a while now."

"How do I use it?"

The big man shook his head. "By God," he said, his voice without anger, "you have got a lot to learn. And maybe you better start with your cap. Take it off when you speak to a free man."

"Oh . . ." He took off his cap.

"Some of the guards liable to learn you the hard way." He laughed. "Ask Bass about that when you get a chance. Reverend."

The Negro trusty said, "Yessir, Mr. Rayford."

"Show him how to use that hack."

The hack had a wooden handle about two feet long. Fastened to the bottom of this was a lead weight of about seven pounds; at the other end was a convex iron blade only a few inches long; along with the short iron shaft by which it was fastened to the wooden handle the whole thing made a rough Y shape. The cutting edge of the blade was almost razor sharp.

"You hold it this way," the trusty told Mayfield, showing him how to grip the handle just above the weight. "We's

working virgin woods around here. These trees aint been boxed more'n a couple of weeks. Some of 'em got five faces on 'em."

Mayfield had heard the terms all his life, and had paid little attention to them. But boxes, he knew, were the deep holes cut into the base of the trees. The faces were the V-shaped scars above them from which the gum would drip down into the box, the number of faces depending on the size of the tree. "You want to make one streak on each side," the trusty told him. "You take hold of your hack an' just come down, like this. Hit it hard enough to come all the way through with one lick."

The boxes were cut into the very base of the tree, the faces above them only a few inches high at this point. Mayfield knelt in order to get low enough to strike at the tree. "You better not kneel," the trusty said in a half whisper. "Mr. Rayford aint bad, but some of these here guards report you to the Cap'n sure."

"Then how——?"

"You just stoop. Aint time to kneel." He stooped, struck the tree, and slashed a clean gash from it with one blow, then struck again to form the opposite side of the V. "That's it."

"Wait. Is——?"

"Even Mr. Rayford aint going to give us all day."

"You'll show Joe? He probably knows more than I do, but he's never——"

"Mr. Rayford aint said show him. I reckon he just have to learn for hisself."

The trusty was gone. Mayfield straightened and saw that the convicts had formed a rough line through the trees, a trusty at each end of the line. Behind them, about the middle of the line where he could see all the men, was the guard. In the gray light the men looked deformed, stooping at the bases of the huge trees, swinging their hacks.

Mayfield bent and struck at the tree in front of him. The hack twisted in his hands; the blade stuck in the thick bark. It took three blows instead of one to cut a single gash in the

tree. Then three on the other side of the V. When he looked up the line of convicts was already ahead of him. The men did not walk from tree to tree; they trotted with the same ragged, shuffling trot at which they had come to work.

Mayfield ran too, stumbling, limping, but determined to keep up. And again it was not primarily fear. There was the memory of the old man lying dead beside him on the tent chain; the memory of Parker being knocked down with a rifle butt. But these now seemed detached, impersonal acts of violence, somewhat like being struck by lightning. He ran now because of a desire that he did not yet understand, to keep up with the other prisoners, to do his share of the work. It seemed to him (though there was no time now to think it out) that this was why he had come here; in it lay not only escape from being shot or struck, but salvation.

It was this, unformulated as thought but present in some recess of soul or body that was deeper than the mind, that kept him going. Within half an hour his hands were blistered; within an hour the blisters started to break, and soon after that to bleed. He knew that his foot was bleeding again, but he realized this only spasmodically, in moments when the pain came clearly through the physical exhaustion that dulled the pain like an anesthetic. Soon it was not the pain that made him limp as he ran, made him stumble and fall over tree roots; it was a simple physical inability to keep his feet. Once he found himself standing in front of a tree, unable to bend his back against the pain that was dull as an iron bar down his spine—then, with an effort as fierce mentally as it was physically, bending anyway. The handle of his hack was wet with blood; it slipped in his grip and tore more flesh. For a while he was conscious of Joe Booker working just to his right, watching him from time to time, once helping him to his feet when he fell. Then Booker was just one of a blur of black and white stripes with which he had to keep even.

"All right." He was not sure who said it, whose hand held

his arm. "You getting so much fun out of this you don't want to eat?"

He was lying on the ground. Perhaps he had eaten something, perhaps not. There had been an instant of peace, of rest; then a foot touched his shoulder, a voice said, "Time to get back at it."

And now he was conscious of pain as he had not been since early morning. It flamed all the way through him. I'm not going to get up, he thought. I want to, and I can't. The only contact between his body and brain was a one-way route along the afferent nerves. From brain back to muscles there was no connection. Get up, he told himself; and did not move, could not.

Yet, somehow, he was on his feet. He and Joe Booker were holding to one another, swaying. He was walking, away from the wagon, which he knew now, without memory of having ever seen it before, had held the tin buckets of crowder peas and fatback and cornbread.

There was only one thing he would remember about the afternoon. At some point (he was no longer conscious of time) he turned away from a pine, stumbling, and saw the man he had seen the night before, the captain of the camp, sitting on a horse not ten feet away regarding him soberly. Mayfield did not know his name, did not at that moment even remember where he had seen him, recognizing him now only as authority. To authority he held out his hands: one gripping the hack, the other palm open, raw, blood-smeared. "My hands," he said, his breathing labored. He was not asking to quit work but rather for a means of doing it. "I can't hold the hack. It keeps slipping."

"Won't it even hold your cap?"

"I beg your pardon?" He stood swaying slightly, frowning slightly in an effort to understand. "Oh . . ." He took off his cap, and dropped it, and picked it up again. "You see? My hands won't hold."

"Piss on them," the man on the horse said. He swung the horse around and was gone.

Behind Mayfield (he was moving again without knowing it, his cap on his head again) the guard said, "You heard the Cap'n." And still he did not understand, until the guard said, "Hell, it'll help 'em. Toughen 'em up. I've seen a lot of hands worse'n yours."

And this was what he remembered most of the afternoon: standing there and the sting of the urine against his hands, dully surprised that it did sting, surprised that he was capable of sensation beyond the pain that was already there; and aware too—this awareness also dulled by exhaustion, but more acute than that of the pain—of the human indignity, the degradation that was not only personal but included the whole group in which this could happen, yet believing at the same time that what he was doing was beneficial and, in fact, necessary for his survival. And choosing to do it—to survive.

This was what, later, he would remember from the afternoon. But the day was not over, not even when, somehow, he had completed the daylight work and survived the trip back to camp, not knowing whether he ran or walked or was dragged. He was standing in the line before the cook tent, not because he was hungry but because in some blind, animal fashion he had arrived here. He did not even realize the line was not moving, no one was being fed. Then he saw that Ryan Durrance and several of the guards, unarmed inside the compound, were facing the line of waiting prisoners.

"That's the one," a guard said. "He gave me a lot of trouble yesterday bringing him out from Pinetree. Today he wasn't even going to work alongside a nigger. And tonight I thought I was going to have to shoot him to get him on the squad chain."

"He wanted to chain me to a nigger." It was Enod Parker. "I don't mind working, Cap'n. I ought to be able to work, I been doing it all my life. But a white man aint supposed to be

chained to a nigger. And he aint supposed to eat with 'em neither."

Ryan Durrance's face was as unemotional as that of any judge. "We have one sleeping tent, one cookstove, one mess table. I guess if you are going to eat and sleep in this camp, you're going to have to eat and sleep with the other convicts."

"It aint right!" Parker cried. "Goddamnit, Cap'n. It aint right!"

Durrance's face did not change. "In this camp right is whatever you have to do. Step out here."

The little man moved out between the long line of convicts and Durrance. Durrance held the whip coiled in his right hand; now he let the strap drop, gripping the whip by the handle only. The light from the open cookstove and the kerosene lanterns licked softly along the swaying leather. "Drop your pants," he said.

"What?" Parker cried. And then, his voice low now, but a statement of fact, not a question, "You aint going to whip me, Cap'n."

"I think I am," Durrance said. "Drop your pants, and get down on your hands and knees."

A thin line of spittle came from one corner of the little man's mouth. His lips, framed by a ragged, three-day beard twitched. He was bareheaded, his cap in his pocket, but he stood very straight, his thin shoulders flung back, face lifted. "You aint going to whip me, Cap'n. Aint nobody whipped me since my momma done it the last time—and I run away from home then. Aint nobody going to now."

"Your name's Parker, isn't it? Enod Parker?"

"That's right, Cap'n."

"You're the one killed Jess Miller?"

"I oughtn't to done that. I was drunk."

"No, you shouldn't. And you ought not to be arguing with me now. I was going to give you a quarter crop, Parker. Just so you would learn to quit arguing with your guards. Now if you

want to make it hard on yourself, all right. If you don't, drop your pants and get down on your hands and knees."

"I done told you, Cap'n. You aint going to whip me."

"All right," Durrance said. Only his head moved. "Reverend," he said. "Silas. You two take his pants off and hold him."

The two largest Negroes in the line of convicts moved slowly forward. They had almost reached Parker before the little man swung about to face them, his eyes aghast, mouth working. "You black sons of bitches, you touch me I—" He swung wildly, striking one Negro on an upraised arm. Then the big man had him in a bearhug, pinning his arms to his sides and lifting him clear of the ground while the other Negro swiftly circled them and from behind stripped Parker's trousers down onto his heels. But even then the two of them could not hold the little man in a kneeling position. They had to stretch him face down, naked below the waist, upon the ground.

"All right," Durrance said. He began to swing the whip. He swung it methodically, strongly, impassively, counting aloud with each blow. Yet by the time he reached fifteen the blows were coming slightly faster than at first and imperceptibly harder. There was an almost imperceptible change in his voice, thickening it.

"Twenty-five," he said, and stopped. His hand holding the whip shook slightly. He said, "That's your quarter crop, Parker, for arguing with your guards." And to the two Negroes still holding the little man face down upon the ground, "Reverend, you and Silas turn him loose. Get up on your hands and knees, Parker."

The little man rolled to a sitting position. He started to struggle to his feet, saying, "I aint kneeling for—" Durrance struck him across the side of the head with the strap. It knocked him face down again. "Hold him," he said, and once more began to swing. He was counting again, his voice a little thick, the blows noticeably faster as if trying to get ahead of

the count, as if the whip itself had become animate and taken over from the man who swung it.

Yet at the count of twenty-five Durrance stopped. He was breathing more heavily now. His tongue moved from right to left between his lips, moistening them before he said, "Turn him loose, Reverend. Get on your hands and knees, Parker."

The little man did not move. "You heard me," Durrance said. "Get on your hands and knees."

The little man lay motionless, face down in the sand. "God-damnit!" Durrance said. His hand holding the whip began to shake noticeably. He put his left foot on the back of Enod Parker's neck. He began to swing the whip, not methodically now but as fast as possible, not counting, without sound until—it had only been a few seconds, a half-dozen blows, a little burbling sound burst from his lips and he stopped, the act of stopping as violent as the blows. He jerked his foot from the little man's neck.

"Get up, Parker."

The man did not move.

"All right," Durrance said. He turned to the guards. "Let 'em eat supper now."

But in turning his eyes had touched on David Mayfield. He swung back as if jerked by a string. He said softly, "Do you have any comment, Mr. Mayfield?"

Mayfield was wearing his cap. He did not know if it was the almost birdlike touch of Joe Booker's hand on his arm that made him aware of this, or the direction of Durrance's gaze. He would never know. He was only semiconscious; yet in his semiconsciousness it seemed to him perfectly clear that at this point he must make a decision, a continuation of the one he had made that afternoon to urinate on his torn and bloody hands; the decision now to be final; to struggle for survival through whatever degradation was necessary, or by a simple weary refusal to raise his hand achieve what he had hoped to achieve from Tom Mawson's rifle. He knew he could not take

a whipping now and survive another day in the woods. The whipping would not hurt; he was beyond physical pain. And the ancient desire for release, oblivion, was still there. Only now he was too exhausted to be tortured by it. Also, there was the beginning of something else.

He raised his right hand. It took a mental effort to close his fingers on the cap and remove it. "No, sir," he said.

CHAPTER 13

On week nights, more often than not, Ryan Durrance slept at the convict camp, but tonight he rode home, pushing his horse harder than usual. Nearly always now there was a black mood on him after a whipping. He was not consciously aware of this (if asked, he would have said he was not subject to moods); though he had noticed that often now after a whipping his hands would shake and he could not stop them. He did not try to understand why they shook even though the shaking itself, the inability to control it, infuriated him. Tonight it made him strike his horse harder than necessary, riding hard through the cold darkness.

That fellow Parker is going to be a troublemaker, he thought, and remembered, abruptly, the sight of Mayfield's face, the way he himself had swung around even as he was turning away. I wonder why I spoke to him, he thought. What made me call him Mister, even joking? But there was no answer to this, and he put the thought immediately out of his mind. He could never ponder consciously more than a moment or two on his own actions, and scarcely at all on his motives. This was not a conscious arrogance: it had simply never occurred to him that a man's own actions might need explaining to himself.

On the other hand, he could puzzle over behavior which, judged by the light of what he himself would have done under the circumstances, he could not understand. His mind, taking hold of something of this sort, would not let go. And he did not understand David Mayfield.

"I put him in Rayford Tyner's squad," he told Rose, eating the supper she had saved for him. The children were in bed. "Ray doesn't push as hard as most of the guards."

His wife sat with her elbows on the table, chin on her folded hands, watching him eat. "Why are you pampering him?"

"It's the first week or two that's hardest on them. More of them break down or try to run and get themselves killed in the first week or two than any other time. And this Mayfield—I doubt if he ever did a day's work in his life before. There wasn't any need of turning him over to somebody like Frank Seton and getting him killed the first day."

"And how did he do?"

"He tried. I reckon he tried as hard as any newcock I ever saw. Of course he didn't know what he was doing, and his hands got in pretty bad shape." Durrance ate slowly, steadily, speaking in the same way, his face bent forward above his plate. "He's big enough. And strong, I guess, once he toughens up. What I can't understand——"

"What can't you understand?"

He did not realize she meant this as a joke since he had already said the same thing to her half a hundred times. "Why he's out there," he said. "With all that money he's supposed to have up in Alabama, and that lawyer down here to try and help him. And all he would say was, 'I killed her.'"

"He ought to know whether he did or not."

"Sure. And maybe he had a reason." He pushed back his empty plate. "Only most folks don't *want* to go to the chain-gang."

"Maybe he thought that was the only place he'd be safe from Tom Mawson."

"No. That's the funny thing. He's not scared. Or if he is, it's not of Mawson. And it's not of work. It's like he——"

"What?"

"I don't know."

She was moving the dishes from the kitchen table to the

sink. "Aside from your Mr. Mayfield, how did things go?" She had not meant to ask the question; it had slipped out against her will. Now with her head lowered, not looking directly at him, she saw his fingers begin to open and close.

"All right," he said.

She did not speak again, and he said, "I think I'll take a bath while the kitchen's still warm."

"There's water on the back of the stove."

He bathed, put on his nightgown, blew out the kitchen lamp. The floor was cold to his bare feet. There was no light in the bedroom, but a fire still burned faintly in the parlor and the glow from it flickered across the bedroom floor. He got into the bed and pulled the covers over him and put his arm around his wife. His feet were cold; a little shivering ran through him. After a moment he said, "Turn around, sugar. I've got to get warm."

"You can get warm this way."

"Not warm enough."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't ride all that way home tonight just to get my feet warm."

He was almost asleep when she said, "You whipped somebody today, didn't you Ryan?"

"What?"

"You whipped somebody. Was it this Mayfield?"

"Another newcock, scrawny little fellow named Parker. Said he wasn't going to work alongside a nigger, or eat with them. How'd you know?"

To his amazement she began to cry, softly. "It was the way you made love."

"The way I . . . There aint but one way. What are you talking about?"

"Not just that." She had her face turned from him, her words, the soft sobbing, half muffled in the pillow. "I knew it when you came in tonight, as soon as I looked at you. At least I thought . . ."

"I have to whip somebody almost every day, sugar. Two or three times a week anyhow. I don't know what you're talking about."

Her sobbing held a frightened, and almost terrified note. "Last week when you came home and slapped Donnie because he got out of bed to see you; you'd whipped somebody that day. Two of them. I knew it before you told me."

He was touched by the sound of her crying, and at the same time angered by something he did not understand. "I told you, Rose, we have whippings out there all the time. I have to do it. It's part of my job. That's the only thing those convicts understand. They are murderers, outlaws. But they aint worth anything at working if you don't make 'em."

"I know that. Only——"

"Mine's not the only convict camp in the state, Rose." He spoke softly into the darkness. "Mr. Ivy has camps all the way from the Georgia line down to Cocoa. If mine doesn't get as much work done per man as the others, then I'm going to be out of a job."

"You could go back with the railroad."

He scarcely heard her, saying slowly, "And it does look like those prisoners get lazier all the time, have to be whipped more every week."

"That's just it!" She turned to face him, taking hold of his nightshirt with both hands. "You could go back to the railroad, Ryan. You could get your old job back. If you'd stayed with the railroad, you'd be making more money now than with Mr. Ivy. Why don't you go back to the railroad, Ryan? Why don't you?"

"Why?" He shook his head at the inexplicable vagaries of woman. "Because I already have a job, sugar."

His father had been a small-time farmer and an unlicensed preacher in south Georgia. He had owned fifty-two acres of land, but no slaves, though this was because of economics rather than principle. Not owning slaves, he could see no point in fighting a war to defend them, and it had taken three Confederate marshals to round him up and get him into uniform. Then in 1864 he was home again, with one arm and a slow-burning hatred of everything except his personal God of vengeance.

Ryan Durrance had been born in 1867, the second of four boys. The father whipped them regularly, nearly always on Sunday afternoons, using a plowline reserved for that purpose and preaching to them while he did it. Ryan accepted this until he was fifteen. Then one Sunday morning he left the church while his father was still preaching, untied the family mule from the wagon, and rode south. Two days later, near Bainbridge, he got a job in a sawmill. He then sold the mule and sent half the money home, explaining in a carefully written letter that the family owned land and two mules and he considered half of one mule as his fair share of the property. A year later he quit the job in the sawmill, moved into town, and got a job in a grocery.

He was twenty-five when, in 1892, he arrived in Pinetree to clerk in Judge Allen Benet's dry-goods store. He was a tall, handsome, soft-spoken young man who went to church on Sundays and usually also on Wednesday nights and was never known to curse, not even on Saturday nights when, the women customers all gone for the day, a group of men would gather around an open jug in the back of the store. On such occasions Ryan might have one drink, to be sociable, but no more. No one had ever seen him drunk. He had no close friends.

He had been in Pinetree perhaps three months when, on a Saturday night, the group in the rear of Judge Benet's store was electrified by the news that a Negro named Roger Mifflin had killed a white man on the edge of town. The Negro

had a bad reputation, having already killed two members of his own race. Immediately a posse was made up and dogs sent for; but since the dogs were some distance away it would take several hours to get them.

Durrance heard the news with the others. He knew when the dogs were sent for and the time it would take to get them. He knew the town fairly well by now and where the murder had taken place. Also, he knew Roger Miffin (he traded at the store) and that he came from somewhere in south Georgia.

Durrance looked at his watch. It was ten minutes after nine. The northbound train was due through at a quarter of ten. There was considerable talk about this, and armed men were already spreading out to search the railroad yards to make sure the Negro did not have a chance to catch the train when it stopped.

"Judge," Durrance said to his employer, "I reckon you are going to close up now."

"Hell yes," the Judge said, putting a pistol in his pocket. "I aint going to miss the fun. You?"

"I reckon not," Durrance said. He helped lock up, then walked to his rooming house and got the pistol from his dresser drawer and walked back, not hurrying, to the depot. He was there when the train came in, one in a crowd of perhaps a dozen that informed the conductor and engineer of what had happened. Yet no one noticed that he was still on the train when it pulled out.

It was eighteen miles to the next town and the train arrived at 10:15. The town marshal (notified by telegraph) met it, along with a half-dozen self-appointed deputies; they searched to make sure the Negro had not managed to catch the train despite the search in Pinetree. Durrance watched them, and then turned without speaking to anyone and walked south, down the middle of the track.

It was a night in early spring, cool, with the faint, fresh-washed smell of rain in the air. There was a moon, but the

sky was overcast so that little light came through; at times the rails made a pale glimmer like steel fireflies, and faded again. Crossing a trestle the air was heavy with the odor of honeysuckle and again, where the tracks edged a swamp, there was the smell of magnolia, the blossoms pale smudges against the black wall of leaves.

Durrance was not thinking of anything particularly. He had wondered, briefly, whether the Negro, heading north along the railroad, would run or walk; but he could not be certain and did not worry one way or the other. He walked steadily, quietly, wanting to hear before he was heard. He wore a dark suit, but that was largely accidental. If he did not meet the Negro, he was prepared simply to keep walking until he reached Pinetree, go to his rooming house and to bed.

He had gone perhaps five miles when, stopping to listen, he heard sounds somewhere ahead. He stooped and put his ear close to the track. He straightened, left the track, went down the slight embankment that was there, and stepped behind a telegraph pole. He took his pistol from his pocket and waited.

He had no clear plan. He stood there, the pistol at his side pointing toward the ground, and waited.

In this light and from the side of the track, the figure was not visible until it was almost even with him: a man moving at a soft, shuffling trot. That was all he could tell. He waited another moment; the man was abreast of him now. "Roger," Durrance said, his voice clear but not loud.

The man stopped. He might have been white, might have been a Negro. It was impossible to tell. "Roger," Durrance said again. "It's Mr. Ryan Durrance." (He had no idea why he should identify himself; had not known he was going to.) "Put your hands over your head."

The man must have had the gun under his belt. His hands moved (Durrance could tell that much), lifting. Then there was the flash of fire; the sharp jolt of the bullet striking the

telegraph pole a few inches from his face; the sound of the shot. Durrance up to this point had not raised his gun. Now he fired from the hip. He saw the figure stagger, move backward across the track, and he fired again. At this instant the moon came clear: its light reflected on the man's pistol spinning ten feet into the air and down, a brief-lived rocket. The man fell backward across the far track.

Durrance went to him. The man lay face down across the track. Durrance stopped and with his left hand rolled him over. "It's Roger," he said aloud.

The Negro moved. There was the flash of the switch-blade knife. Durrance tried to block it with his left hand, reaching across his own body. He felt it, like a slight electric shock at the left corner of his mouth. At the same instant he fired into the Negro's body. Then, standing up now, he took aim and fired once more, directly downward, into the man's head. Then again.

The blood from his cheek ran across his jaw and down onto the collar of his shirt. It'll wash out, he thought, but I don't want it to get on my coat. Holding a handkerchief pressed against his face, he walked, neither fast nor slow, the five miles back to town and located the town marshal and told him what had happened. Later a doctor took five stitches in his left cheek, leaving that corner of his mouth pulled slightly upward.

It was shortly after this he was offered, and accepted, the job of Pinetree ticket agent. His work here as in Judge Benet's store was quiet but efficient. He continued to go to church. It was at a Wednesday night prayer meeting he met Rose Skinner; she lived in a town twenty miles away and was visiting relatives. When she went home again Durrance bought a saddle horse and began to ride those twenty miles to see her and twenty miles back each week on his day off. Four months later they were married.

He had been married two months when, closing the depot one night after the 9:45 train, he heard the sound of shooting from the village.

At this time, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the town of Pinetree and most of north Florida was as truly frontier as ever Tombstone and Dodge City had been. Phosphate pits were beginning to be worked. Sawmills and turpentine stills were moving through the vast forests of virgin yellow pine. They offered employment of a kind to anyone tough enough to stand up under it. A man wanted by the law in Alabama or Georgia or South Carolina could find work here and no questions asked. Or he could find a bit of hammock land in the pine woods and squat on it, and no questions asked there either. Knife fights and shootings were common, but on this particular night what Durrance heard sounded more like a small battle than an individual gunfight. He listened for a while, then reopened the depot and got the pistol kept in the station agent's desk. With this in his pocket he walked, unhurrying, uptown.

There was a full moon, its light cream-colored on the unpaved sand street, the wooden sidewalk, the unlighted store buildings. The sound of the shooting, very spasmodic now, came from just beyond the little business section and though he was within a block and a half of it now there was still no one visible. Under the full moon the sand-rutted street lay completely empty. From the darkness between two buildings a voice said, "Ryan! You better get out of the moonlight, man!"

He stopped and recognized the man who had spoken, the two others with him. "What's happening?" he asked.

"God knows for sure. Except Hardy Moore's gone crazy. He's killed Alex Day and old Mrs. Waters and Tom Jerome and maybe two or three more by now. And he's got old Mr. Nash Waters locked up in his own rooming house and is threatening to burn up the place with himself and Mr. Nash both in it if anybody comes after him."

"Hardy's drunk?" Durrance said. He knew the man: a gambler, a tough who'd been in trouble a half-dozen times of late.

"Sure. The way I heard it he and Alex Day and three or four others were playing poker in Hardy's room, and Alex accused Hardy of cheating. There was an argument, and Hardy shot him. Alex managed to run outside and got just about the middle of the street, and Hardy followed and shot him again. Then he went back inside. I guess the other men had run. Anyway, old Mrs. Waters came running out and, just about the time she got to the middle of the street, Hardy shot her. They are both of them still there. I saw 'em."

"And Tom?" Durrance asked. Tom Jerome was the town marshal.

"Somebody went for him. Hardy was back inside the rooming house shouting out the window that he'd burn the place down if anybody came after him and burn old Mr. Nash Waters with it. He's bedridden, you know."

"I know."

"You can smell kerosene half a block. I don't know where Hardy got it, but he must have soaked the whole place in it, the way it smells. And he was still taking a shot out of a window every now and then. He still is. Hear him?"

"And Tom?" Durrance said again.

"I was here by the time he came. He stopped at the corner, by Partin's grocery, and began to yell at Hardy. Hardy told him to keep away and Tom kept shouting for Hardy to come out. Then Tom shouted, 'I'm coming after you, Hardy!' and started across the street. He got just about the middle and Hardy shot him. They are all three of them out there now."

"Where's Jim Lavender?" Lavender was the county sheriff.

"Gone to High Springs, and Martin with him. I think somebody's gone after them."

"They may not get back until tomorrow. We can't wait until then."

"I don't know. There are men all around the place. But

Hardy keeps running from room to room. At least he keeps shooting out of one and then another. In this moonlight and with that big yard there's no way to get at him. Besides, he keeps swearing that if anybody does get in the house he'll burn the whole place down. Blow it up like a bomb with all that kerosene."

"I think I'll take a look."

"You better do it from the shadow. That son of a bitch will shoot at everything that moves. He missed me about six inches."

"All right," Durrance said.

He went on, keeping close to the buildings now. More persons spoke to him. Then he reached the corner. There were several men here, pressed against the corner of the grocery store. He spoke to them and moved until he could see past, see the three bodies sprawled in the moonlit street and beyond that the Nash Waters rooming house. It was a two-story frame building sitting alone on a half block of land. On two sides there was lawn, on the other two a garden, but nothing in it now in the late fall that would offer a man protection except a few rows of corn, and these were at the back of the lot.

"Hardy!" Durrance called.

There was no immediate answer. "He's probably on the other side of the house," one of the men back of Durrance said. "Now'd be the time to rush him."

"And get just about the middle of the street," another man said. "The bastard's shooting a rifle and he don't miss."

The only lights in the rooming house were on the first floor, the soft glow of kerosene lamps showing from the front door and one room. "That's Mr. Nash's room," a man said. "I wonder what he's thinking, laying up in there with all this going on."

"Hardy!" Durrance called again.

The voice answered from a darkened window on the second floor. "Just keep away! Every damn one of you keep away!"

"You can't get away, Hardy. You might as well come out and surrender."

"I'll burn the place down first. Anybody does get in here, I'll burn the place down on him and me too."

"He means it," a man said.

"Yes," Durrance said. He turned to the man who had spoken. "Give me about three minutes, then call him again. Get him around to this side and keep him here as long as you can."

"Keep him? How in hell——?"

"Argue with him. Tell him you are going to rush the place. I won't need but a few seconds to cross that garden."

He did not wait for an answer but turned and went back down the sidewalk and through an alley to the next street, trotting now but not fast, his hand on the pistol in the pocket of his dark coat to keep it from bouncing. He came at the house from the back, beyond the few ragged rows of corn. There were men here too, standing back of trees in the yard of the neighboring house. "I'm going in and get him," Durrance said when one of them spoke to him. That was all.

He reached the ragged rows of corn, and waited. From across the street in front a voice began to shout, "Hardy! We are going to rush you if you don't come out." He heard Hardy answer.

He ran now, but not full tilt, picking his way through the garden, the rows of fall collards and mustard greens. Then he was at the back of the house. The odor of kerosene was strong. When he opened the back door it was stronger still. The lamp burning at the front of the hall showed an oily trail along the floor. From the bottom step of the stairway one drop fell jewel-like, and vanished. Durrance stooped and took off his shoes.

The sound of the rifle was loud in the house. From the front room upstairs, Durrance thought, and went quietly along the hall toward the lighted room in front. He could feel the oil through his socks now.

The door to the room was open. Through it Durrance could see the big, four-poster bed, and in it old Mr. Nash Waters propped up on pillows. His eyes were open but looking at nothing. His mouth hung open; there was no sign of breathing, but now and then one side of his mouth twitched slightly and a thin line of saliva spilled down across his chin. Durrance looked at him for a moment and turned away, keeping close against the wall.

Steps moved along the upstairs hallway, directly over his head; they went into another room and out of that with scarcely a pause, to the back of the house, the opposite side, to the front of the house again. From the front window Hardy screamed something unintelligible.

Durrance moved now. He went swiftly down the hallway to the stairs and started up them. His left hand was on the banister to guide him; his right hand held the pistol still in his pocket. When his left hand touched the newel post at the head of the stairs he stopped, crouching now. There was almost no light here, but straight ahead across the upstairs hall a door opened into a bedroom and the windows at the far side were touched by moonlight.

Hardy came out of the front room down the hall toward the stairs. Durrance could hear but not see him: on the other hand, he himself was dimly visible because of the light from downstairs. But he was close to the newel post which Hardy must know was there, must be accustomed to seeing. Hardy passed within two feet of Durrance, turning into the room opposite him, visible now against the windows on the far side.

"Hardy," Durrance said, "if you move, if you move even your head, I'm going to have to kill you." And then he said, "This is Ryan Durrance."

Hardy Moore did not move. "Drop that rifle," Durrance said.

"No. They'll lynch me out there. I rather you shot me."

"They won't lynch you."

"Yeah, they will too. They'll hang me. And I aint going to be hanged."

"They won't lynch you. I won't let them."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"All right," the man said. He dropped the rifle, and, standing straight, still without moving, he began to weep loudly, like a child.

There was, indeed, some talk of lynching when Ryan Durrance first took his prisoner out into the street. "No," Durrance said, in his quiet, matter-of-fact voice. "I'm going to take him to the jail and lock him up, and stay with him until the sheriff gets back. There won't be any lynching. I promised him that." So there was no lynching, and even surprisingly little discussion of it.

"Which," the town's mayor told Durrance three days later, "wasn't so much because you scared all the toughs in this town who might have taken part in a lynching, as it was because you convinced the men who would have had to lead that you meant what you said. And convinced 'em also that you were doing what you thought was right. That's why I'd like for you to take the job of marshal. You are young, but the people here respect you. They figure you will do just what you think is right, and stick to it."

"What does it pay?" Durrance asked, and when the mayor hesitated, "I'm married now. Before much longer I may be having a family. I have to consider that."

"Naturally. And that's the problem. The town doesn't have any money. But we can pay twenty dollars a month, and I've already talked to your boss, Mr. Bartlett. The marshal's job is just come-on-demand. You can take it and stay on with the railroad too."

"All right," Durrance said.

As marshal his work was quiet but efficient. He continued to go to church on Sundays, taking his wife and the new baby,

Ryan Junior, with him now. In the two years he served he killed two men, but in neither case did he force the fight; once he waited so long to draw his gun that he lost two fingers of his left hand when his would-be prisoner fired first.

He was twenty-eight years old when Mr. H. G. Ivy offered him the job of captain at the convict camp nearest Pinetree. "And wait a minute before you refuse it," Mr. Ivy said. "I know, some of our camps are sort of unpopular with some people around the state. In this work you get ahold of a guard sometimes who may be a little meaner than he needs to be, and that gives the whole system a black eye. But I don't want to hire you as a guard; I want you as captain in charge of the whole camp." He paused, as though what he had to say next was physically painful. "Room and board when you stay at the camp. And thirty dollars a month more than you are making now. That's considerably more'n I pay most captains. But I need you."

"What about Frank Seton?" Durrance asked.

"He can stay on as your assistant, if he wants to, and if you want him. Otherwise he can quit."

"What's wrong with his work as captain?"

"It's costing me money," Ivy said. He was a large man in his sixties, his body gone soft in recent years but with the hard framework still showing beneath the softness. "Do you understand how this leasing of prisoners works?"

"Not particularly," Durrance said.

"I have the contract with the state to lease all convicts. I pay the state twenty-four dollars and sixty cents per year a head. That's for each one, cripples, nigger women, white women when we get any, idiots, everybody. I have to feed, clothe, and house them, have a doctor for them when they are too sick to work or too banged up in some way. That's required in my

lease. There are close to a thousand head, more or less. I have a few hundred sublet to sawmills and some other turpentine people, but most of 'em I work on my own turpentine leases. Those not fit to work I have to keep at headquarters camp, down close to Silver Springs. Altogether it's a right pretty penny I have to pay out."

"I can see that," Durrance said.

"When they are worked properly it's a good business. It can show a good profit. But when a man's not working, when he has to lay up in bed and maybe even have a doctor, he not only costs as much as one who is working, he costs more. I try to do a little farming at headquarters, grow things for the other camps, make the uniforms, that sort of thing. Even so, that place costs me a couple of thousand dollars every year."

They were sitting in the living room of Ryan Durrance's home. Mr. Ivy's big head swung abruptly from right to left, making sure Rose Durrance was not within hearing. "Thank God we don't get many white women."

"I suppose not," Durrance said.

"Never more'n one or two at a time, usually. They're no good as field hands, not much good at sewing or cooking, the ones we get." Again his head turned, making sure he wasn't being overheard. "We had one down there last year; she was sent down from Leon County for drowning her own baby. I don't know if she was too stupid to work, or too smart. There wasn't but one thing she was any good at."

Once more he looked toward the kitchen doorway, then back to Durrance, his expression both amused and outraged at the memory of what had been both profit and loss. "I never heard of anybody like her. She wasn't bad looking either; but I reckon somehow she never had enough men before in her life. Anc. there are always eight to a dozen guards around there. I even—" He stopped the sentence abruptly, said, "Probably some of the prisoners, the trusties, weren't always too sick or old to slip out to the barn and meet her. Not that she gave a

damn where. We had to quit trying to get any field work out of her."

Durrance had listened with interest but without smiling. Mr. Ivy said, "When her time was up we—they couldn't get rid of her. She didn't want to leave. I reckon she'd never had things so good. Some of the guards had even taken to bringing her presents; I had to fire a couple of them for fighting over her." He shook his head thoughtfully. "The Captain had to put her out, force her. And then she stood out in the road shouting that she'd be back."

"Was she?"

"She tried. First thing she did when she got to Ocala—hadn't been in town five minutes when she walked in Ed May's dry-goods store and picked up a bolt of cloth and started out with it. When nobody stopped her—Ed saw her but couldn't believe what he was seeing—she turned around and came back and walked out again with it. Only it was petty larceny and they kept her in the county jail."

For a moment Mr. Ivy seemed lost in thought. Durrance asked, "Frank Seton's never been stationed at your headquarters camp, has he?"

"No. But he's sent a lot of men there." Mr. Ivy's expression was once more that of the businessman stating business facts about which there could be no doubt. "Those convicts aren't Sunday school children, Ryan. I understand that. And I don't think the state leased them to me to be pampered. They have committed crimes and they are being punished. But mine is a business arrangement, and every man who is unable to work costs me money. I know that some of them have to be whipped to force them to work. But when one is whipped until he can't work, then I'm the one who is hurt. If he is strung up by his thumbs so long he can't hold a hack or a puller afterward, I still have to keep feeding him and paying the state for him while he gets well, if he ever does. Every day a man can't work, every time a doctor has to visit the camps, it costs me money.

I'm running a business, not a place to let Frank Seton see how nearly he can beat a man to death without actually killing him."

"I've heard he was rough," Durrance said.

"A good captain has to be rough," Mr. Ivy said. "But Frank Seton overdoes it. To tell you the truth, I think he gets fun out of punishing the men. He invited me out once to watch a whipping. I didn't go of course. I——" He stopped. After a moment he said, "You understand, I'm not opposed to proper punishment. That's necessary. If a man tries to run and is killed by a guard, it's his own fault. A guard can't go running after one prisoner and leave his others. Besides, if a man is killed, he's marked off the books and I don't have to pay the state for him, except the pro rata share of the year he's worked."

Mr. Ivy paused, said, "What I want, Ryan, is to operate a profitable business, to get a legitimate return on my investment. With humane treatment, of course, for the prisoners. I don't approve of torture." He raised his right forefinger now to emphasize his point. "That's why I want you. I have an idea the men will work for you. They'll know you mean business. But you won't have to keep the camp and the hospital at headquarters full of cripples who have been punished until they can't work."

"I could handle them," Durrance said.

Mr. Ivy stood up and held out his hand. "We'll shake on it. You can give the railroad notice and start work the first of the month." At the door he said, "Will you be willing for Seton to stay on as second man at the camp, if he wants to? As captain you'll be responsible for administering any necessary punishment—and except for that Frank's a pretty good man."

"Let him stay if he wants," Durrance said.

He did not expect to have trouble with Seton. He knew the man and was sure he could handle him. Besides, he himself

was not the person to cross bridges before he came to them. He put Seton to work as a guard, and three mornings later, riding his horse from squad to squad in the woods, found the man standing over a prostrate convict, a stick in his hand.

"Frank," Durrance said.

Seton spun around. He was a short, heavy-set man. "Jesus, Ryan. I didn't hear you ride up."

"I reckon you were too busy beating that prisoner." And in the same quiet tone of voice, "When you are guarding the men, Frank, you aren't supposed to get within twelve feet of one. That was your own rule. What if he grabbed your gun?"

"I wish the son of a bitch would try."

"Also," Durrance said, "at this camp from now on any prisoners that are punished I'll do it. I thought we had that clear."

"Well, goddamnit, Ryan—" He stopped. They looked at one another, perhaps fifteen feet apart, Durrance still on his horse. Seton's lips twitched. "The son of a bitch won't work, Ryan. What was I supposed to do, fan him?"

"Chiefly," Durrance said, "you are supposed to watch the men in your squad. Where's the trusty supposed to work your right line?"

"Henry?" He turned, fast. They were at the edge of a small bayhead; the open pine woods were to the left, a bayhead, thick with underbrush, to the right. Spread out among the trees to the left six men were visible; the one Seton had been beating still lay face down, unmoving. There was no sign of the eighth man of the squad. "Henry?" Seton said again. "He must be pulling trees in that bayhead."

"I don't see any pines in there," Durrance said. "Call him." And as Seton began to call Durrance rode past him to the edge of the bayhead. The ground was moist here. He saw the tracks and followed them, still on horseback, into the bushes. There was a small slough here. The tracks led into the water and disappeared.

Durrance turned his horse and rode back to where the man

nearest the bayhead was working. "Where's the trusty supposed to pull this right line?"

The Negro straightened slowly. He took off his cap. "Aint he there, Cap'n?"

"Why do you expect Mr. Seton's calling him?"

"I figured it was to take care of that sick fellow."

"All right," Durrance said. "When did you see him last? Did you see him run?"

"Cap'n," the man said, "when Mr. Seton's whipping somebody he don't want nobody to see nothing but the work they's doing. That whole swamp could've run and I wouldn't knowed it."

"All right," Durrance said. He did not waste time nor did he hurry particularly. He rode to where Seton stood beside the prostrate prisoner. "You," he said to the man on the ground. "What's wrong with you?"

The man moved his head slightly, that was all. "I'm sick, Captain."

"Too sick to work?"

"Yessir."

"You want to try to work out the rest of the day and then see a doctor? Or do you want to be sent in with the mess wagon? If you go in with the wagon and the doctor doesn't find anything wrong with you, you'll wish you had worked. You understand what I mean?"

"I'm sick," the man said. "I want to go in with the wagon."

"Get your other trusty to chain him to a tree," Durrance told Seton, "so you can watch the rest of them. And keep them working. When the mess wagon comes at dinner time, send this man back with it."

"There aint nothing wrong with him," Seton said. "He's just——"

"We'll find out," Durrance said, and was gone. He rode at a steady lope, firing his gun three times while still a mile from camp so that by the time he got there the dogs were ready

and the guard who worked them, a long-legged countryman named Moore, was waiting just outside the compound. "Who's run, Cap'n?"

"A nigger trusty, named Henry Morris."

"Well, we liable to go quite a piece before we catch him. That Henry's a traveling fool."

"Then let's start."

It was the first time Durrance had ever seen dogs used to hunt a human being. He watched carefully, without expression, while Moore put them on the trail at the edge of the slough, while they hunted around the slough—the prisoner had a three-hour start now—and found the trail again where it left the water. The dogs fought against the leash so that Moore, holding them, moved at a half trot. Durrance followed on horseback. After an hour he volunteered to take the dogs awhile and let Moore ride.

"Hell, Cap'n, I can go on like this all day."

They went on, through the late morning and all afternoon. Once the trail crossed a road, later a railroad. It varied direction to dodge farmhouses and clearings but held chiefly north-westward. "He's headed for home country," Moore said. "He comes from up around Monticello somewhere."

"I know."

"Well, that's too damn far for any man to walk without resting. He'll have to stop somewhere."

It was almost dark now. This time when Durrance said, "You ride for a while," Moore said, "All right, Cap'n." And a few minutes later, where the trail bent once more to circle a farmhouse, "How 'bout us stopping long enough to get something to eat? That nigger's bound to hole up before long."

"You ride over and see if you can't buy us something. I'll go on with the dogs. If you don't catch up with me in half an hour, I'll give a couple of whoops to guide you."

Moore brought the food and they ate it on the move, going more slowly now but still going. It was a country chiefly of

pine forest; in places it had been turpentine and then cut over, the stumps, the lopped and burned tops witchlike under the moon. Durrance and the guard took turns riding. "That nigger aint bothered about trying to lose the dogs one time since he left that slough," Moore said. "He's just aiming to outrun 'em."

Now it was daylight again, the country more rolling. At noon one of the dogs lay down and refused to get up. Both its forefeet were bleeding. Durrance (he was walking now) picked it up and handed it to Moore on the horse to carry.

It was midafternoon when Moore said, "Cap'n, I don't know what you are made of, but I got to stop. And we know where that nigger's heading now; he's heading home. So we might as well sleep awhile and go on tomorrow and pick him up."

"By then he may have moved on. He might be in Georgia."

"I hope he is. Any nigger can run like this one, he ought to get away."

"No," Durrance said. "If one gets away, he sets an example for the others. My job is to see they don't get away."

"All right," Moore said. "So maybe I aint got a job. Right now I don't care. I'm going to that farmhouse over yonder, and if they won't give me a bed I'll sleep in the barn. But I got to stop awhile."

"All right," Durrance said.

He went on. There was no need to keep the remaining dog on a leash now. It still trailed, but with no desire to run, and shortly after dark it lay down and refused to get up. "All right," Durrance said, speaking to it in the same tone he had spoken to Moore.

It was midnight when he reached Monticello. He was walking now; a mile outside town his horse had stepped in a gopher hole, fallen, and stayed down. Durrance went ahead on foot, located the sheriff, and got him out of bed. "I'm after a nigger

named Henry Morris. He was sent to prison from around here about five years ago for killing another nigger."

"I know him," the sheriff said. "But have you got to have him this time of the night?"

"Yes."

"His daddy lives a couple of miles out of town. We'll probably find him there."

"Let's go," Durrance said. And later, as they approached the cabin in the sheriff's buggy, "Wait until I get around to the back before you go up to the front door. Then if he tries to run, I'll get him."

So he was standing beside a backyard well, in the shadow of it, when he heard the sheriff knock at the front door and saw, a moment afterward, the back door open and a figure come out, stumbling. "Henry," Durrance said. He stepped into the moonlight. "If you try to run again, Henry, I'll have to kill you." And then, "This is Captain Durrance."

The Negro stopped. He swayed slightly. "Lordgod, Cap'n! How'd you get here?"

"I followed you."

"Well you aint got to follow me no more. I couldn't run another step if you was to shoot me." He swayed again, sat down on the back step of the cabin, put his face in his hands, and was asleep. Durrance had to shake him awake, had almost to lift him to get him into the buggy. But it was only after the man was locked in the county jail that he himself went to the local hotel and went to sleep.

Two days later he was back at the prison camp, having returned with his prisoner by train. In the back room of the shack that served him as office he asked Frank Seton about the prisoner who had been beaten. "Has Doc Rand seen him?"

"Yeah." Seton shifted a bit uneasily. "I guess he was sick all right. Breakbone fever, or something like that, Doc said. Anyhow, he died last night." Durrance said nothing, and Seton

said, "Hell, Ryan, how was I to know it? The bastard'd been claiming to be sick ever since he came here."

"Maybe he was."

"Then they ought not to of sent him. I aint any doctor. And if you let one guy get away with laying up in camp, they'll all do it. You'll find that out."

"Maybe." He was looking straight at Seton, but his voice was as quiet as ever. "I'm the Captain here now, Frank. It's my job to punish the prisoners. Nobody else does it, unless I'm gone, then you take over. But not when I'm here."

"I know that. What are you going to do about that nigger that ran away?"

"What would you do?"

"I'd hang the son of a bitch by his thumbs and give him a full crop."

"A hundred lashes? Would he be able to work after that?"

"He'd work or—" He stopped. "A half crop anyhow."

"A half crop," Durrance said. He had already made inquiries; fifty lashes was considered a mild average punishment for a first attempt to run away. "Tonight just before supper. I want the others to see it."

"Then you better give him more'n fifty, unless you are going to string him up too. If you don't, some of these mean ones'll figure you're soft."

"I doubt it," Durrance said.

It was the first time he had ever whipped a man, or even seen a prison whipping though he had heard enough about them to know the general procedure: the Negro kneeling in the light of the kerosene lamps, elbows and forearms touching the ground, naked from the waist down; the blows slow, rhythmic, regular, striking anywhere from the small of the back to just above the knees, his own voice numbering each blow without any change in tone—except that it seemed to him the fifty lashes were far more than he had ever realized they would be; before he reached thirty his arms felt tired, his breathing

labored, and he had to force himself to keep the rhythm unbroken.

Then it was over. He looked away from the man on the ground to the line of prisoners drawn up to watch; the filthy black-and-white striped uniforms, the dark and bearded faces emotionless, almost featureless in the dim light. "My job is to keep you men here, and to keep you at work. I'm going to do it. The harder all of you work, the better we'll get along. There will be no unnecessary punishment in my camp. But there will be as much as is necessary."

He turned. He went out of the compound and down the short, sand-rutted street between the blacksmith shop and the commissary, the shacks where the guards slept, to the one that served him as office and sleeping quarters when he stayed here overnight. He was not consciously aware of a desire to be alone; he closed the wooden door without even knowing he had done so. Nor did he ride home that night, but finished the paper work necessary at the camp and undressed and went to bed. He was not ashamed of what he had done, but certainly there had been no pleasure in it. He lay looking up into the darkness, not thinking about the whipping, not thinking about anything, just waiting for sleep. Yet it was a long time in coming.

If there was any change in Ryan Durrance's character during the next three years, he was not personally aware of it. He ran a very efficient camp in which there was a minimum of trouble and which produced a maximum of labor. In some camps if a prisoner managed to escape without being shot in the process, very little effort was made to recapture him: Durrance gave his bloodhounds constant training and special care, learned to work them himself until he was as good at it as the guard assigned to them. If a prisoner escaped from his camp,

Durrance followed with a persistence even greater than that of the hounds, as long as it was physically possible. On one occasion, where circumstances made it possible to change both dogs and horses, he stayed on the trail for seventy-three hours, following his man for over a hundred miles before running him to earth.

There was, however, a slow, almost imperceptible increase in the number and severity of general whippings. Durrance was aware of this as a physical fact, but only in the same way that he was aware one winter might be colder than the preceding one or one summer wetter than another: he took no note of the cause any more than he did of the cause of cold or rain. It did not occur to him he might be whipping men one year for offenses he would have overlooked the year before; it did not occur to him that he was beginning to obtain a certain amount of pleasure out of causing pain.

It was a simple accident that Durrance happened to be at the courthouse the night David Mayfield was brought in. He had gone to speak to the jailer about the removal of a prisoner; then, on the first floor, he had stopped in the hallway to say good evening to Jim Lavender and was about to leave when, through the open door, he saw the group coming up the wide front steps: the handcuffed man in front whom he had never seen before, the two deputies, and after them the others, Tom Mawson and the hunters, all of whom he knew by their first names. He looked at them with the mild, detached interest with which he regarded most things; then he looked again at the handcuffed man in front, watched him come through the door into the lighted hallway and pause.

He was a tall man, about the same size as Ryan Durrance, his features regular, handsome, but as empty of expression as blank paper. He's drunk, Durrance thought, and then thought,

Drunk, but it's more than that. He's been hit on the head; he doesn't know where he is. And thought, No. It's still more.

One of the deputies touched the man on the arm. "In there," he said, and the man turned, his gaze leaving Durrance's face exactly as it had touched on it at first, impersonal as air, and went through the door into the sheriff's office.

Durrance followed. He watched the man stand quietly, looking at nothing, while the deputies, the hunters, Tom Mawson, sometimes separately and sometimes all talking together, told their stories. Then the sheriff said, "You"; and again, "You!" reaching out and touching the man so that the blue eyes moved slowly and found him. "What's your name?" Then to the others, "Is he deaf?" and again, "What's your name?"

"James."

"James who?"

"James Madison."

"What were you doing out at old Mr. John Ellis' camp?"

The man was a long time in answering. "It doesn't matter. I killed her." He lowered his head, looking down at his own hands with a kind of quiet wonder.

Walking home that night, Ryan Durrance kept thinking of what had happened; he could remember in detail exactly how the stranger had looked, and the group after him, coming out of darkness up the courthouse steps, into the lighted hallway and pausing, the empty gaze not resting on his face but passing through it into nothing, and later the dull but obviously educated voice saying, "It doesn't matter. I killed her."

He told Rose about it and when she asked what the man had looked like he described his clothes in detail, the flannel shirt open at the throat, the hunting jacket. "It wasn't new, but not old either. It looked like it cost a lot of money; but there were old bloodstains on the right shoulder where I guess he had carried deer or something."

"But what did *he* look like?"

They were in the bedroom, undressing, Durrance sitting on

the side of the bed unlacing his shoes. "He was drunk; not the staggering kind of drunk, but kind of frozen. When he sobers up tomorrow he probably won't know where he is or how he got there." He took off his trousers, unbuttoned the top half of his union suit and took his arms out of the sleeves, pulled it down around his waist. He pulled the flannel nightgown on over his head, then, under the protection of the gown, pulled off his underwear. His back was toward Rose. They slept in the same bed, undressed in the same room, but never looked at one another while doing it. "When he does sober up, he'll change his story, I reckon."

"Will that help him, now that he's told it?"

"It'll depend."

She got in the bed, and he walked barefooted across the cold floor and blew out the lamp and came back and got into the bed beside her. She said, "Whoo, your feet are cold!"

"They'll get warm."

"If I don't freeze first." And half laughing, "I suppose that's the reason men get married: so they'll have a way to get their feet warm in bed. Or one reason anyway."

But he did not answer. She was almost asleep when she heard him say, "Maybe he won't change."

"What, Ryan?"

"Maybe he won't change his story when he sobers up. There was something strange about that fellow. Something more than just being drunk."

"Oh! Are you still thinking about him?"

Again he did not answer. He lay on his back looking up into the darkness, not consciously puzzling over what had happened but merely waiting for sleep, in that misty, suspended state midway between sleep and wakefulness. Yet through this half consciousness the figure of the man he had never seen two hours previously kept moving. During the months of his courtship Rose had often filled his semiconscious in this way—not so much with thought as with a dream mixed of

memory and imagination, stemming not only from sexual restlessness and desire but from something beyond them; the deep, instinctive, sure even though unrecognized, knowledge that here he had encountered something that touched on a part of himself he could not altogether control. Only now there were no sexual undertones, either conscious or unconscious. He was as innocent of any homosexual impulse as he was ignorant of the word itself. Yet deep in the corroded core of brain or blood in whatever it is that still shelters in mankind the neglect-withered remains of life's instinct, something moved. He could feel the shadow of altered destiny pass over him.

CHAPTER 14

David Mayfield did not know what the day was, only that in some way it was different. There had been a difference in the iron clanging that awoke him, in the way the breakfast line moved through the cook tent. When he finished eating there was already daylight in the sky, though he was scarcely aware of this, waiting for the squads to be chained together for the morning run.

Joe Booker said, "It's Sunday, Mr. David. We don't work on Sunday."

"Oh. . . ." He stood there, not actually thinking as yet, not even sure of what Joe had said, just that the routine into which his body had fallen was somehow altered: get up in darkness, move with the others, keep moving, always keep moving, then darkness again, eat, and sleep which was not quite oblivion because even in sleep there was the dull gnawing of pain. "Sunday?" he said.

"And the longest one getting here I ever saw," Booker said. He put his hand on Mayfield's arm. "Whyn't you go rest some more, Mr. David?"

"All right."

He opened his eyes (not aware that he had closed them or had moved from where he stood), and Joe was leaning over him, hand on his shoulder, saying, "It's dinner time, Mr. David. You better eat something. They tell me we eat a little better on Sunday. Sometimes we get biscuit."

He did not taste the food, had not tasted it since that

first morning. But when he had finished his mind was working clearly enough so that, without prompting, he moved with the line to where each man washed his own bucket and cup and spoon and returned them to the cook tent. Then he was outside again and slowly aware of the sunlight, warm as water, soaking through his filthy canvas clothing. He looked around him at the compound which he had not seen by daylight since the afternoon of his arrival: the two tents, the well—which until this moment he had not even been aware of—and the single deformed pine tree, its twisted limbs scrawled against the pale winter sky. And around it all the barbed-wire fence with guards on two sides.

Inside the compound men sprawled like animals on the ground or moved slowly at self-appointed jobs. Looking at them, Mayfield was vaguely aware of a change in some of them, though he did not know what it was. He felt the sun beating on him and moved his shoulders slightly and felt the pain of soreness; he moved again, deliberately, aware of the pain now, aware that it was bearable and that the very presence of it meant he was alive. He raised his hands and looked at them, raw and swollen, and moved the fingers slightly. How long have I been here? he thought. Less than a week, since this was the first Sunday. Or had there been other Sundays lost in the struggle simply to stay alive? He did not think so. "This is the first," he said, speaking aloud, quietly, into the empty sunlight.

He moved slowly across the compound to the pine and carefully, because his brain was not only catching up with the pain now but beginning to anticipate it, sat down with his back against the tree. The sun was in his face, and when he began to sweat slightly he raised a hand to touch his cheek and found that he was bearded. Of course, he thought; no chance to shave. He lowered his hand, let both hands rest palm up in his lap in the sunlight. His eyes closed.

"You've made it through the first week," a voice said. "If

you can make it through another couple of weeks, then you are over the worst of it, at least as far as standing up to the work is concerned."

Mayfield opened his eyes. The convict was hunkered down on his heels, country fashion, not more than two feet away. He was a gaunt man of indeterminate age with no excess flesh on him anywhere except his face. The face was remarkably long from forehead to chin, from nose to upper lip. The mouth drooped; the cheeks drooped in heavy jowls like those of a bloodhound. But in this sad, weary, wise bloodhound face were set eyes as bright and vicious as those of a parrot. The eyes studied Mayfield intently.

"Of course," the convict said, "after you get where you can stand up to the work, then you get around to really knowing these sons of bitches that work us. And that's even worse."

Mayfield did not try to follow the meaning of this. I've seen him somewhere, he thought. He's in my squad. And said, "You're the fellow showed me how to wrap my leg iron, that first morning in the woods."

"Sure. I gave your cap back to you, in case you wanted it. Me, I'd of thrown the damn thing away. I won't wear one."

"Why not?"

"So I don't have to take it off when I speak to the bastards." He pulled his lips back in what was half snarl, half grimace, and Mayfield could see that his front teeth, both upper and lower, were missing. "The first guard I spoke to after I got on the chaingang, I didn't take my cap off. I didn't even know I was supposed to. And you know what the bastard did? He hit me in the mouth with his rifle butt and knocked me down and then kicked me in the face. Kicked my teeth out, what he hadn't already knocked out with his goddamn rifle. He said that'd teach me to speak to a freeman without taking off my cap. When I got up I left my cap on the ground and he asked me why and I said so I wouldn't have to take it off. The son of a bitch knocked me down again. But I've never worn a cap

since then." In the long, sad, weary face that had not changed expression while he spoke the eyes glittered violently. "Of course it gets me whipped now and then. But they respect me for it. The bastards respect me."

Sitting on his heels, his shoulders leaning slightly forward, the convict's face was so close that Mayfield would have moved back if the tree had not been behind him.

"My name's Bass," the convict said. "Lenier Bass. I've got more education than any of these bastards, freemen or prisoners. Except you, of course. I never went to college but I went through high school. And I've read a lot of books. Whenever I'm outside I read a lot of books. All kinds of books. Poetry, just plain stories, everything I can get." The long face hung in the sunlight before Mayfield. "I read one time that if you knew what made people the way they are, if you understood them, then you would forgive them. It's not true. I understand these bastards. I've watched 'em; I've studied 'em; I know them better'n they know themselves. And I hate every goddamn one of them."

He rocked back on his heels. "Except maybe Rayford Tyner. You were lucky to get in his squad."

"Is he the guard?"

"Sure. Only don't ever try to run on him. Not if you want to get away. He shot me once, through the leg after I had a good two-hundred-yard start. Broke it right here."

Mayfield stared at him. "I thought you said he was not as mean as the others."

"That's what I'm telling you. He could have hit me in the head just as easy as the leg—and most of these other bastards would have, if they could. They figure it's fun to kill a convict because they can get away with it. It makes 'em somebody. You know what they pay a guard here? Fifteen dollars a month. And the guards don't live much better than we do, except they don't have a chain around their leg. They don't even eat better. What kind of men do you think they can get

who'll work like dogs for that, run back of us all day, eat sour beans and rotten fatback that would choke a pig? Live in shacks even nigger families wouldn't live in? You get the kind that can't do anything else. But give 'em a gun and a convict to watch and they are somebody. They can prove it by making you take off your cap to speak to them and knocking you down with a gun butt and shooting you in the back if you run."

"All of them?"

"Every goddamn one of 'em—except some are worse than others just naturally. And Tyner's not as bad. Because he don't have to work here. He's got a little farm of his own and he only works here part time. But if you want to know about any of the others, you ask me. I've studied them, the sons of bitches. I know 'em." The almost toothless mouth puckered and spat. He leaned forward again, the bright parrot eyes fastened on Mayfield's. "Where'd you know the Cap'n? What's he got in for you?"

"What captain?"

"Ryan Durrance. Every time he comes in the compound he stops and looks at you, or just looks at you without stopping. He gave orders to put you in Ray Tyner's squad. I guess if they'd put you in Frank Seton's squad, he'd of killed you that first day. Did you bribe him?"

"I never saw him before I came here. Unless I saw him while I was in jail; I think he came there. But if so I never spoke to him."

"I suppose not." The long face puckered in thought; the eyes clouded as if a film had passed over them. "He's a strange one. He might not take a bribe. And if he did I guess he'd either kill you for it, or not bring you here at all. Send you to headquarters camp." Abruptly the little eyes glittered again. "You ever been to headquarters camp?"

"No."

"I was. That time Ray Tyner shot me they had to put me in the hospital there. They got women down there. When I

was there, there wasn't but one white woman, and the son of a bitching guards kept her. I never even saw her. But there must have been two dozen Negro women." He leaned forward. "You know why they work white men and Negroes together on the chaingang? I wasn't born down here. I was born in Pennsylvania; so it don't make much difference to me. But you know why these Crackers work white men and niggers together? It's because when you are on the chaingang you're not a man any more. You're a animal; so it don't make any difference whether you are black or white any more'n it makes a difference whether a mule is black or white. Only here you're not even a mule. You wouldn't be any better'n a snake, except they can't get any work out of a snake."

His voice lowered abruptly. "You want to shave?"

"Shave?" Mayfield said. It was then he realized that Bass wore only a jagged stubble of beard. Also, this was the change in some of the other men that he had noticed without realizing it. They were not as bearded as they had been. "Is there a barber?"

"Not exactly. But on Sunday they let us have a pair of mule shears." The parrot eyes studied Mayfield carefully. "I've got a piece of glass I keep a edge on. It's not exactly a razor, but it's better than those mule shears. But they'll whip me if they find it. They'll whip both of us if they catch you using it."

"I don't want to cause you any trouble."

Bass looked quickly around him, then back to Mayfield. "Call that Negro, Joe, the one came here with you. Nobody'll notice if they see him leaning over you. He's been leaning over you ever since you came. He can shave you."

"I don't want to get you in trouble," Mayfield said again.

"A man's got to shave sometimes," Bass said. "So those bastards will know he's not a animal. So he'll know it himself."

When Mayfield awoke that Monday morning he was more conscious of soreness, of the stabbing pain that accompanied his first cold movements, than on any morning since he came. Yet he knew also that this very consciousness was an indication of improvement. The self-induced narcotic which a pain otherwise beyond bearing produces in the human body was wearing off. After that first day, after the first morning, he had not thought at all, not even of pain; he had been kept moving by something far more primitive, something closer to the core and source of life itself than is the human mind. But now in the cold darkness he could think consciously of the ache which accompanied the shivering of his muscles; he could taste the slime of the fat meat cooked with the peas he ate for breakfast. And running toward work, he became aware that he had not fallen a single time this morning, and then of something else: a dim but distinct pride in that accomplishment.

Yet when he began work his hands would not hold the hack. The swollen flesh, partially healed by the day of rest, tore again. The hack handle was wet with blood before the sun was clear of the horizon. Once more he was working as he had the previous week, in a kind of coma, striking time and again at the same tree, running to keep his place in the drift of men beneath the pines, not thinking, not actually conscious, the stimuli bypassing the brain, from eyes to arms to stumbling legs, their actions as automatic as that of his lungs and heart.

Even so, there was a moment of consciousness. He was urinating on his hands and became aware suddenly of the sting of the urine. For an instant he saw himself as he might have in a dream: head bent forward, the uncombed, uncut red hair, the face shaved yesterday with a piece of broken glass, the filthy convict clothing, the blood-smeared hands held forward and down with the urine striking on them. Who? he thought, looking at himself as at a stranger. Then he recognized himself. And then—the thoughts passing slowly one after another

through his mind—he realized what he was doing and what it signified: the struggle to survive: the mingling of hope and degradation.

Behind him Rayford Tyner said, "If you through admiring yourself, you better get back to work."

He turned back to his work as into a fog that blurred the mind rather than the eyes. Timeless. And then (it was toward the end of that same week, early morning, the sunlight almost level beneath the giant pines but with already a touch of warmth it had not previously held) he looked at his hands and saw they were not bleeding. They were swollen and scarred and filthy, but not bleeding. He held the hack in his left hand and opened and closed the right. He could feel the soreness; but it was only soreness. He put the hack in his right hand and opened and closed the left one. He gripped the hack with both hands, put it against the tree, and saw the strip of bark come off cleanly with one stroke. "Ahh . . ." he said, and straightened and moved at a dogtrot toward the next tree, aware not only that men were working to right and left of him, but that the one on his left was Lenier Bass, the man on his right was Joe Booker.

"Joe," he said.

Booker, halted before the next tree, turned his head. "Look," Mayfield said. He brought the hack down, once on the right, once on the left, two new raw wounds above the old rosin-stained ones on the pine. "Ahhh . . ." he said again, and lifted his head, grinning savagely at Joe Booker.

CHAPTER 15

Frank Seton, the guard, knew that most of his prisoners would take pleasure in killing him if they got the chance. To his way of thinking, this was perfectly natural. It was basic as the law of gravity, established by God, or by whatever quirk of destiny had made these men convicts and had made him a guard, by the unknown "they" who had set up chain-gangs in the pine woods of north Florida where he had been born and where he would eventually die—as natural as the fact he would kill any prisoner who attempted to run. It was simply part of the system.

Even among the guards that Mr. H. G. Ivy employed for fifteen dollars a month, who lived on prison diet and worked almost as hard as the prisoners, following them at a dogtrot from before daylight until after dark, Frank Seton was a special case. His father had been a guard at the state's first prison at Chattahoochee; he had been raised around prisons. In him the streak of cruelty (inherent in all men but kept latent in most by civilized conventions) had in some perverse way become merged with his sense of humor. He was a practical joker, who would hang a convict by his thumbs because he thought it was funny that a man could be hung by his thumbs and that such a little thing should obviously hurt so much. He thought the grotesque, bulb-tipped thumbs that resulted from such a hanging were funny. On one occasion he had returned a captured runaway to camp by putting a chain around his neck, fastening the other end of the

chain to his buggy, and trotting his horse all morning. The prisoner's arms were tied behind him so that he could not run well; he was dragged a good bit of the way and died a few days later as a result. This did not ruin the joke for Seton, since convicts were not really people. It was true they had a certain economic value, but one could always be replaced with another, and anyway the business belonged to Mr. H. G. Ivy, not Seton.

On the other hand, though Seton sometimes beat his wife or children, his dogs or his horse, he never seriously injured them. They were his and of some value. He did not think of himself as cruel: he was simply a guard, doing a job, part of a system.

Now, with his rifle cradled in his right arm, he followed his drift of men through the wood, checking them automatically, and talking to Enod Parker. Usually he did not expect or allow answers, but he liked to work Parker near the middle of the squad where he could follow close behind and talk to him because Parker gave him more chance to joke than any other member of the squad. For one thing there was the gaunt little man's obvious hatred of being grouped with Negroes and considered no better than one. For another there was his love of timber, and his hatred of turpentine.

Enod Parker had been born in south Georgia. He had worked in sawmills since he was big enough to carry a slab. He loved the smell of fresh-cut lumber, the scream of a saw, the wail of a noontime whistle. When he looked at virgin forest he saw it as piles of logs being snaked to the mill, great stacks of green lumber, and burning sawdust piles. And so he loved it. The sight of cutover land did not bother him because that was what the timber was for, and there would always be more forest ahead. Yet the sight of woods that had been turpentine made him almost physically sick. He was certain that to bleed the rosin from a pine ruined the lumber. When he looked at turpentine woods he saw only the de-

formed trees of the future, the ones that had been boxed too deeply and were wind-blown, rotting on the ground, the blackened stumps that fire could leave.

And also, turpentineing—the actual use of hack and puller and paddle in the woods—was not a white man's work. It was nigger's work.

Behind him now, Seton said, "What's the trouble, Parker? You letting these niggers get ahead of you? I don't think you as good a man as they are."

Parker did not answer or look back. He had learned better than that. He added two streaks to the tree face in front of him, moved around it to the face on the opposite side, and hacked the streaks on it. One of these times, he thought, I'll get the chance. They can't watch me forever.

It was the one thing he had thought about since his whipping after the first day's work. The work itself had not broken him. He had worked physically all his life. His hands were accustomed to the handling of green lumber, and the smooth handle of a hack or puller did not bother him. But since his whipping he had not spoken to another man, convict or guard.

Behind him Seton said, "Sink that hack in the tree deep enough to do some good, Parker. What do you think Mr. H. G. Ivy gives you them number two hacks for? He's in the turpentine business not the lumber business."

It just ruins the tree, Parker thought. Ruins the lumber. It don't even get more turpentine to cut it deep. He raised the hack. The face of the tree was shoulder high now; the hack when he raised it on a level with his eyes. If this was the neck of that bastard back of me, he thought—and sank the blade deep into the wood.

This time Mayfield knew it was Sunday. And it must be April, he thought. Or almost. There was enough daylight

to see by even at breakfast. Later, as the sun brought warmth, he joined a group of men around a fire in the compound over which sat a huge iron kettle. He bathed for the first time since coming here. He stood naked, close to the fire, while Joe Booker took his convict uniform and boiled it in another kettle with his own and several others. "We got to let it boil for a while, Mr. David, to kill the lice."

"Lice? I hadn't felt any. Not that I knew of."

"Yessir. But you'd feel 'em before long."

"I suppose I haven't felt much of anything."

"How you feel now?"

"Alive. And cold."

"It's still pretty chilly."

He crowded closer to the fire, then turned his back to it. Scattered around the compound were several other fires. Around them men stood naked and half naked and dressed. Most of them had their buttocks and legs and sometimes their backs marked by old scars, and some by new ones. On all of them the leg iron had left scars, sometimes red and ugly, sometimes merely a growth of calloused skin. Mine's healing, he thought, examining his own ankle.

Joe Booker dipped a pair of convict trousers from the boiling water with a stick, handed the stick to Mayfield, and dipped out another pair. They dried the trousers before the fire, put them on, dried their shirts and jackets. It was mid-morning when Booker got a pair of the mule shears. Mayfield sat on the chopping block by the woodpile while Booker began to trim his hair as well as possible.

Lenier Bass joined them. He hunkered down on his heels; the sad bloodhound face, the little vicious eyes regarding them intently. "When you ready to shave you can use my glass," he said.

"Thanks."

"You're feeling better now." It was not a question but an obviously thought-out statement. "You're a lucky one. Lots of

the newcocks like you that never been used to working don't make it. Some of them get sick and can't work and then they get beat and that makes them worse. Or maybe they fight back and get whipped and that weakens them so they can't work and they get whipped more. I was in a camp over near Marianna once they brought in four newcocks, and three of them were dead in a month. A guard beat one of them to death with a stick; broke something inside him, I guess. One of them got pneumonia. And one of them cut his own throat with a hack. He just laid it up against his neck, like his neck was a pinetree, and pulled. It took out everything right to the backbone. You could see the backbone coming out of his shoulders and going up into the skull. And did you know that blood won't stain bone like that? At least it didn't with this fellow. There was blood all over everywhere, but that bone was just as white and clean as paper."

"Why did he kill himself?" Mayfield asked.

"He just couldn't take it. He hadn't ever done any physical work before and he couldn't take it long enough to toughen up. He was a big, fat man from over around Jacksonville somewhere; he didn't have any fight in him." The small black eyes regarded Mayfield intently. "As long as a man's got fight in him: as long's he's got hope: to get out, run away, kill the son of a bitch that's guarding him: he can take it. They may kill him but they can't break him. And they know it, the bastards. Like they know I don't wear a cap because I won't take it off for them. And they respect me for it."

Joe Booker said, "I reckon that's about as much of a haircut as I can give you, Mr. David." And to Bass, "If you loan me that glass razor of yours, I'll give him a shave."

"Wait," Mayfield said. "Don't you want your hair cut, Joe?"

He had stood up. They were looking at one another, the mule shears in Booker's hand between them. "I won't be much of a barber," Mayfield said. "But I don't think that in this place it will matter too much."

"Yessir. I guess this place is sort of different."

They swapped places on the chopping block.

Lenier Bass said, "That fellow Parker, the little man who came here the same time you two fellows did—he's going to run before long. And probably get killed doing it."

"How do you know?"

"Look at him."

Parker was standing alone, his back against the compound's single twisted pine. His face was too bearded to show any expression: the thin nose, the sunken eyes turned toward the compound fence, and the guard standing beyond it with his rifle, and beyond that the naked earth, the occasional fire-killed pine, here and there now a soft touch of green where spring grass was growing, and in the distance the ragged wall of trees that hemmed in the camp the way the horizon rings a ship at sea. For only a few seconds Parker stood perfectly still; then he began to move, going halfway to the fence and turning, going halfway to the fence on the other side.

"He can't keep still," Bass said. "Not even on Sunday. He can't do anything but walk and look at the guards and out at the woods. I been watching him. I told you: I watch all these people, I study 'em, convicts and freemen. And he's going to run. He aint said a word to anybody since that night he got whipped. He hasn't had a bath or shaved. This morning I had a kettle of boiling water and I asked him if he wanted to wash his clothes in it. He didn't even answer me. He's going to run. The guards know it too. Frank Seton knows it."

"Seton?" Mayfield paused in his awkward clipping of Booker's hair. "How does he know?"

"The same way I do. It's funny about running. Some fellows like this one, you know they are going to run as soon as you look at them. Because they don't think about anything else. They make all kinds of plans. Others don't make any plans at all. They don't even know themselves they're going to run. And then all at once it's like a rope broke and they are running.

Take that last time I ran. I'd been planning for a year. I was going to get to be a trusty because then your chances are better. I was going to get to be a trusty and I was going to wait until Ryan Durrance was away, clean out of the county, so he couldn't follow me with the dogs. Or maybe I was going to get transferred to another camp. A lot of camps they don't even bother to chase you once you get away: they shoot you if they can, but if you get away they say to hell with you, like a dog that's not worth bringing back anyhow. Only Mr. Durrance——" He stopped, the long, sad face bent forward, the black eyes looking at nothing.

"And I was all set to be a trusty," he said. "Next time they needed a new one I was to be him. And then one day I looked up and Ray Tyner was taking a leak, looking the other way. And the first thing I knew I was gone, running, right through the open woods, without any idea where I was running to. I heard Tyner shout, but it was like I was falling out of a tree and couldn't stop."

The sad mouth puckered, and spat. He stood up. "I stopped all right, with that bullet through my leg."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two years ago next week." He moved, handing his sharpened bit of glass to Booker with a motion that was almost invisible. "You be careful with this. I keep it buried here in the compound so they can't find it."

CHAPTER 16

Mrs. Mildred Raymond asked, "Where are you going, Laura? You can't be going out to that farm again. I don't understand what's got into you."

"I'm going downtown, Mother."

"Downtown?" Mrs. Raymond made a little gasping sound. "How could you, when you know that everybody who looks at you is thinking that—that . . ."

"Mother," Laura said, "I don't know what everybody is thinking, and I'm not sure I would care if I did. I know what you are thinking: that David is on the chaingang in Florida, for the murder of a woman, a—a prostitute, possibly, and"—her voice paused for only an instant—"and he has said he was in love with her. But I don't know if this is the truth, and neither does anyone else in this town. No one from here has ever spoken to him except Howard, and whatever David may have told Howard, Howard does not go around repeating. So what people think is mostly just what they want to think."

She was standing before the mirror in her bedroom, both hands still raised to the wide-brimmed hat she was pinning in place. She wore a gray skirt, a dark blue jacket over a white blouse and jabot. Now she turned to face her mother. "Besides," she said, "whether that's true or not, I'm not disgraced by it. I've done nothing wrong. There is no reason I should hide from the town."

"But you and David were engaged. It's almost as if you were married."

"Not financially, it isn't. None of the Marshall-Mayfield money is coming to us because David and I were engaged." She was at the door now and turned, one hand holding the knob. "I suppose people are whispering that I've been jilted: that you and I and Miss Clara, and Maybelle even, all of us, were jilted. Because we ran after David hard enough; we tried to corner him, and he got away. Well, so I have been jilted. But I have other things now to worry about that are more important."

She went out, down the steps, along the walk between the azalea and camellia bushes, both bloomed out now. On the sidewalk she turned right toward the town. It was April, the morning sunlight almost audible in splashing through the trees; the sweetgums that were losing the purple and scarlet tones of early spring and going into green, the live oaks turning from dark to soft green with new leaves.

Laura walked steadily, neither fast nor slow. She spoke to the neighbors and passers-by, so carefully casual that a stranger might have noticed no restraint. It was just nine o'clock when she went along the courthouse square, past the hitching posts and the watering trough with petunias beginning to bloom in the flower boxes beside it. On the courthouse lawn the gray stone Confederate soldier held his rifle at the ready and faced sternly north. She crossed the street here, turned down a side street to Howard Cason's office. It was just off the square, on the second floor above Webb's Drugstore.

In the outer office young Edmund Lurton sat at a desk reading law. "Is Mr. Cason in?" Laura asked.

Lurton stood up quickly. "Yes, m'am. I mean—he has a client with him, Miss Raymond. But I could tell him—" "I'll wait."

He held a chair for her. "I could go tell him you are here."

"No. And don't let me keep you from studying. When will you get your degree, or license, or whatever it is?"

"This fall. At least I'm going up to Montgomery and take

the exams. Whether I pass them or not is something else."

"Oh, you'll pass them. Of course you will."

"I don't know," he said, thinking that passing those exams would be the most important thing in his life, and thinking at the same time that Laura Raymond was certainly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and that David Mayfield was certainly the biggest fool, and wondering if those stories about that woman he had killed in Florida were true because he had never heard Howard Cason say anything about them one way or the other, and Mr. Cason was probably the only man in the county who knew, and Mr. Cason was in love with Laura himself, or probably was, since that was what people all said, except he had studied enough law to know you couldn't put faith in what people said, and Mr. Cason had never said anything more about that than he had about what David Mayfield actually had done down at that hunting camp.

He said, "Mr. Cason thinks I'll pass. If I don't, it won't be his fault. He's helped me a great deal."

"Howard has helped a lot of people."

"He has! You don't know how many. I mean, all kinds of people. You'd have to be here in the office to know some of the things he does."

"I know, or part anyway."

The door to the inner office opened, and a man wearing overalls and a blue shirt came out. Standing just beyond him, Cason was saying, "I'll see you then Tuesday at—" His voice stopped for an instant when he saw Laura. "At nine-thirty."

The other man left and Cason came on into the front office. There was a faint flush on his face; otherwise his expression was the one with which he might have greeted any client. "Good morning, Laura," he said, almost formally. And then, "I think this is the first time you've ever been here."

"I never needed a lawyer before." She stood up, smiling. "I

don't think it's a lawyer I need now, as much as just some advice."

"Advice is a lawyer's chief stock in trade." He held the door while she walked past into his private office. "What kind of advice, Laura?"

She stood looking around the room. It was small, a big roll-top desk almost covering one wall. Along another wall bookshelves reached almost to the ceiling. Above the desk hung the framed diplomas, the law degree from the University of Alabama, the certificates of admission to practice before all the courts of Alabama and the Supreme Court of the United States. There were no photographs or pictures of any kind.

He held a chair for her. From it she could see out of the window along the street to the back of the courthouse square, where the wagons of out-of-town farmers were lined two deep and she remembered abruptly that court was in session. "You know a good many of the farmers in Dothan County, don't you, Howard?"

"Most of them, I suppose."

She faced him then, her hands folded in her lap. "That's what I want to talk with you about. You know Mother and I still own that land, it was my grandfather Thomas', out near Hanna's Corner. But we haven't got any money from it in years. I don't think Mother's even been there in fifteen years, maybe longer."

"Do you still pay taxes on it?"

"I think Cousin Doyle kept up the taxes for us; or, rather, Cousin Elton did at Miss Clara's instruction. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about."

"I can look it up for you."

She sat very straight in her chair, and watching her Howard Cason thought, She's changed. I was afraid she was going to pieces, after the news about David, but she's got control of herself. She's got her chin up.

"I've been out there, to the farm, three times in the last

week," Laura said. "There are only two families living there, a Negro family and a white man named McNally. Neither one of them pays any rent, and the truth is they don't do much farming. Most of the land is just going to waste."

"You want me to talk to them, arrange for them to pay you a share of the crops?"

She looked straight at him. "I want to operate the farm, the whole thing. If these men can't work it, I want to get somebody who can. I want to find out about financing, making it pay. There's a lot of land, two or three hundred acres, maybe more, where the timber has never been cut. I wanted to see about selling that, getting the land cleared, or"—she hesitated only a moment—"or leasing it for turpentine. Getting some money out of it so I could operate the farm."

"Have you talked to Elton Marshall?"

"No. I don't like Cousin Elton, Howard. I don't suppose anybody else does, for that matter. But I——" Suddenly her hands clenched in her lap. "I want to do this myself. I admit I don't know anything about managing a farm but I can learn. I want to learn. I want to work."

"Work?" Cason said, startled.

"The place isn't big enough, it isn't good enough, to pay a living for a manager and tenant farmers and have anything left for Mother and me. And Mother and I don't have anything else. So one of us has got to manage it, and Mother can't." She had turned away as she spoke, but now she looked straight at him again. "I'm not complaining. I'm just stating fact. But I'm not asking you to do this out of friendship either. I want it to be business. I want to pay——"

"Laura!" he said.

"I know. I know you will help me. And I don't want to—to hurt you by talking about pay. But I want you to understand. It's something I've got to do, on my own. Or as nearly on my own as I can. But I'll need help, and that's why I came to you."

They sat there, neither looking directly at the other now, and Cason thought, She was hurt, badly. But she hasn't cracked under it. And she's going to recover, get over David, forget him, at least quit loving him.

He said, "All right, Laura. I have to be in court now. This afternoon I'll find out about the taxes; I'll get a property description of the place so we'll know what we are dealing with. Then tomorrow—I don't have any cases in court tomorrow—I'll ride out there and look it over."

"I'll go with you."

"Good. I'll come by in the morning for you. About nine?"

"I'll be ready. And, Howard——"

He said, "All right. It's business. But we'll talk about the money later, when the place is paying."

Laura had brought a picnic lunch and now she spread it on the front porch of an abandoned cabin. A crape myrtle in the yard was putting on new leaves, and nearby a Cherokee rose had gone wild, climbing over the myrtle, over the remains of a rail fence, the encroaching blackjack and sassafras bushes, a small jungle of thorned vine and white blossom.

Looking at it, Howard Cason said, "I used to think there was one sure way to tell a weed from a flower: pull them both up and the one that comes back is the weed; or leave them both alone and the one that dies is the flower. But this rose seems to have done all right without any care."

"That's one flower able to take care of itself," Laura said. "Look at the thorns on it."

"I see them; and feel 'em too." He was trying to break off a spray of bloom. "Tough," he said. And a moment later, looking at Laura, the spray of flowers in his hand, "Tougher than I'd have thought, but beautiful."

She was placing the dishes on the tablecloth which she had

spread on the porch floor. She did not wear a jacket and the sleeves of her blouse were turned back from her wrists. She had taken off her hat; the black hair was piled softly against the back of her neck. Watching her, Howard Cason thought, She's not sure what she's getting into, and not sure yet what she can do. Because she's never had a chance to learn, because she's never had to do anything. But she has courage, and more strength than I knew; more strength than she knew maybe.

He had never let himself love Laura; at least he had never let himself admit that he did. Since she was old enough to attract boys she had been, in the accepted view of the town, destined for David Mayfield, and he had accepted this because Laura herself had obviously accepted it. So Cason had told himself that if he loved Laura it was in the same way he loved his younger sister. And since he had never let himself, even in fancy, go much beyond this point, it was largely true. Now he let himself look at her in a different light.

Only she may still love David, he thought. She hasn't given any hint that she doesn't. She hasn't talked about him one way or the other. And even if she doesn't . . . I don't want her hurt, he thought. What she needs from me now is help, not love, even if I were in love with her. And I don't know.

She turned and smiled at him. "All ready."

"It looks delicious. And I'm starving."

"So am I. It always gives me an appetite, coming out here and walking all over the place."

"You shouldn't come out here alone."

"I'll have to, if I'm going to manage it myself. Besides, I had to come at first to find out enough even to ask you for help. I hadn't been out in years. I didn't even remember for sure how many houses were on the place." She had a piece of fried chicken in one hand, bread in the other, but had not yet tasted either. "Now that you've seen it, what do you think, Howard?"

"There are four cabins, two of them empty." He was sum-

ming it up in his mind as he talked. "There's enough cleared land for four tenants. But most of it's in poor shape. And it's getting late for this year's crops."

"I can't wait for next year!"

"We'll see. I think I can get you a couple of Negro families. But it will take money. This late in the year I won't be able to get any who have their own mules and plows. Also, they'll have to have credit over at Hanna's store."

"How much is all that going to cost? And how much can I get for the timber? Or can I sell it right away? Because if I don't——"

"You can sell it, though it may take awhile before anybody is ready to move in and start cutting and pay cash. But with the taxes on the land paid you can raise money there, if you wish. Or Elton Marshall will finance you against this year's crops, if we get them in. Or I can." He added, half smiling, "Strictly business. A legal rate of interest. Part of the whole deal."

"And if something happened, if it didn't pay? You would have a mortgage on the land?"

"If you want it that way."

"That's the business way of doing it, isn't it? So that's the way I had rather do it. Because—I want, I need to do it that way."

"All right," Cason said.

It was early dark when they got back to town. Cason left his buggy in the street and went with Laura up the flagged walk between the bloomed-out azaleas. The night was soft and alive with spring. A sliver of new moon hung in the west, and somewhere in the darkness tea-olive was blooming, the odor filling the air like perfumed rain. They went up the steps together, and Laura said again, "Won't you have supper with us?"

"No thanks. Emma will be expecting me." Emma was a married sister with whom he lived, but he was not thinking

of her at this time. He did not want to talk with Mrs. Raymond, or with Emma or her husband either. He wanted to be alone, to walk through the darkness, to find out the truth about himself.

Laura put her hand on his arm. "I don't know how to thank you, Howard."

"There's nothing to thank me for." Grinning at her, he looked almost boyish. "It's a business deal. We both ought to profit, I hope."

"I hope so." She half turned—then abruptly turned again, looking at him but not touching him now. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Did he say he loved her? Did he say that? That he loved her?"

Cason took a long breath. "When I saw him, David wasn't really himself. It was almost as if he hadn't got over his drinking bout, as if he had been hit and hadn't quite recovered. I don't mean physically hurt. I had a doctor look at him and he was all right. But things he said didn't make sense."

"Did he say he loved her?"

"I don't remember exactly what he did say. He didn't say much of anything really. He just looked at me."

"So he did say it." She took a long breath, the sound audible in the quietness. And then after a moment she raised her head and looked at him. "Good night, Howard."

"Good night, Laura."

He went back down the walk to his buggy. Elton Marshall, he thought. It's the only way she could have heard; he's the only person I told. And shouldn't have told him. Or did I tell him so he would repeat it, so she would hear it? I don't believe that. I don't want her hurt. Or do I, if it will get her over him? Because we all have to be hurt, and this way might be the least. Only how can I know, how can I judge?

He remembered pulling at the Cherokee rose vine and the strength of the vine holding the fragile blossoms. She'll get over it, he thought. He was aware of the softness of the spring

night, and of the flow of blood through his own veins. He felt better than he could remember feeling since he was a boy.

From the living room where she sat with the shades drawn, still wearing the black she had donned for Clara's and Doyle's funeral but wore now more in mourning for family pride than for lost friends, Mrs. Raymond said, "What kept you so late, Laura? Maybelle's had supper ready for hours and hours, almost. I don't understand why——"

Laura did not answer. She went down the hall to her own room and went in and closed the door behind her. She took off her hat and dropped it on the bed and stood looking at it. He never loved me, she thought. Not even that night, right there, not even while we were—you couldn't call it "making love." Because nobody "makes" love, manufactures it. That's what I didn't understand, that he couldn't love me because he'd never had any freedom of choice, because he was trapped between Mother and Miss Clara and me, the whole town, just as I trapped him alone that night. Only I never had any choice either, and I loved him. Or did I? He asked me that night what was love, and I thought I knew. I'm not sure any more. I'm not sure of anything, except that I'm going to work, that I have to work, not just to make a living but to live. And that I hurt, she thought. I hurt so that sometimes I'm not sure I want to live.

She raised one hand and pressed it hard against her breast.

CHAPTER 17

Ray Tyner, the guard, quit his job to go back to farming. "We'll put the new man, the one who's taking Ray's place, on night duty," Ryan Durrance told Seton. "Then let Eddie Zim take these last newcocks along with part of Ray's old squad, and break up the rest among the others."

"What about this Mayfield?"

"What about him?"

"I'm asking you," Seton said. They were in the cabin that served Durrance both as office and as living quarters when he stayed at the camp, facing one another across a bare table. "Seems like you always took a interest in him."

"I didn't want him killed or sent down to the hospital at headquarters before he had a chance to learn how to work. That's what you've never understood about this, Frank. It's a business. These convicts cost Mr. Ivy money."

"Not the dead ones. He just marks 'em off the books."

"Then they don't show any profit either. You forget, when Mr. Ivy leases these convicts from the state he has to take them all. Everybody. Even without you hanging them up by the thumbs, he's always got a batch down at headquarters: sick, crippled, even a couple of blind ones, six or eight nigger women, that don't earn their keep. So he's got to have enough men in the woods working to earn it for them, and show a profit too."

"Sure," Seton said, grinning. He had been resentful when Durrance first took over his old job as captain, but the resent-

ment had been short-lived. He knew that Durrance and Mr. Ivy worried about the operation as a business, which he had never done and didn't plan to do. So he could see where, from Mr. Ivy's narrow point of view, Durrance might be the better man. What Seton had resented most was the loss in pay, but he had adjusted quickly. His needs were simple; a man lived on what he had. The whole thing was just part of the big practical joke that life played on everybody. He said, "I guess this Mayfield done lived through the worst of it. Looks like he's in pretty good shape for working now."

"All right. Then work him like the others."

"Sure," Seton said. "I reckon I'll put him in my squad. Put him and Parker together. That'll give me a real pair."

This was a Saturday when the men quit work a few hours early, arriving back in the camp shortly before dark so that most of the guards could get into town or to their homes on Saturday night. That Monday work started in a section of the woods that had been turpentineed for four years now. The scarred faces on the pines reached up to a height of ten to twelve feet, so that the men used pullers, a tool with a steel blade like a hack but with a handle six feet long. The gum from the new streaks had to drip the full length of the face to reach the box cut in the base of the tree, coating the tree faces with raw rosin. A fire in here would really take over, Mayfield thought.

A number of the trees were wind-blown, broken where the boxes had been cut deep in the trunks. Others were diseased. And even where the trees still lived they showed no sign of growth in the last few years—living but thwarted, the long scarred faces making them look deformed. As though it were real blood, he thought; as if they twisted in pain. Deformed, like the men working them.

He stopped, the puller raised but not touching the tree in front of him. He stood perfectly still, suddenly looking at himself as if in twin photographs, one showing him a few months

ago, dancing with Laura at the engagement party, merged in the swirl of music, the whisper of feet on polished floor, the rustle of evening dresses under the soft myriad glitter of the candelabra—and seeing beside it the photograph of himself now: the ragged convict uniform that had been boiled yesterday but was already filthy with sweat and rosin and the stain of earth where he had lain to rest after the morning run, the raised face with its stubble of red beard, the matted hair, the still swollen and misshapen hands grasping the puller, pausing for an instant before sinking it into the wounded and distorted body of the tree. Why? he thought. Why am I here? How did I get here?

He did not feel the blow as pain but only as impact. His head jerked backward as he stumbled forward; he caught at the tree, missed it, and fell, rolling. Frank Seton stood over him, the rifle held in both hands, the butt forward and down. "Now goddamnit," he said, almost pleasantly, "aint you learned yet to keep working? Or don't Ray Tyner make his squad work?"

He was still speaking, his voice still pleasant, when he jerked the gun to point at Joe Booker. "What you planning to do, nigger?"

"Nothing, sir." And then, "I was just going to help Mr. David get up."

"I reckon the son of a bitch can get up by hisself. Or can't you"—he grinned widely—"Mister David?"

Mayfield got to his feet. "Now pick up that puller," Seton said, "and get to work."

From thirty feet away Enod Parker saw Seton smash Mayfield between the shoulders with his rifle butt. He did not pause in his work except for the briefest instant, measuring the distance between them, knowing it was too great. Bas-

tard, he thought. He aint supposed to hit the men hisself. He just can't help it. Only one of these days he's going to make a mistake; he's going to get close enough for somebody to turn around and reach him with a puller, lay it alongside his neck like it was a pine sapling, and cut a streak like he never seen cut before. And maybe it'll be me, Parker thought, almost joyfully. Maybe it'll be me.

Why? Mayfield thought.

He was on his feet again, working, conscious of the soreness between his shoulders, but conscious also of a padding of muscle that had absorbed part of the blow. So it was not the blow he thought about now, except as one part of the over-all picture; he had quit work and he had been knocked down. He accepted that; he thought about it not with anger but with a kind of slow, growing amazement as if the blow had not even interrupted what he had been thinking before but rather had been part of it: Why am I here? Why are any of us here? Why are we living like this, doing this, destroying a forest and ourselves with it?

His hands had learned the mechanics of the work at the same time his body had toughened under it: the upward stretch with the puller, sink the blade in the flesh of the tree, rip, then move to the next tree at a trot that had become as automatic as breathing. Because men somewhere need naval stores in a business I never did understand, he thought. Because a Mr. H. G. Ivy whom I have never seen needs turpentine and rosin the same way my father and Cousin Elton and grandfather Albert needed them, to sell as they sold cotton. For money. Only I understood cotton; I knew what you could do with cotton; and I never did understand what anybody would do with a barrel of turpentine or rosin. Medicine, ships, paint. It doesn't matter; something that can be converted into

money. So somebody needs it and you get it by destroying trees. I suppose a lot of the clothes I wore, the food, the liquor I drank, came from this same kind of work.

Only it was not the same, he thought, remembering the chill of early morning and the mist and the voices like laughter calling: "Poontang!" "Alabama!" "Mobile!" Because they were free, or almost free, believed they were free anyway. And we are here because we have killed or stolen and have to be not only kept from killing or stealing again, but punished.

The drift of men moved steadily through the trees, keeping roughly abreast. They worked silently except for the striking of sharp metal against bark, the stumbling of feet. Behind them the guards followed almost as silent, with the exception of Seton who talked to them as he might have talked to cattle, wanting and allowing no answer.

Punished, Mayfield thought. Is that why I chose to come here? Because I wanted to be punished?

He could remember the moonlight and Clytee and the shadows he knew must be men, and his own voice saying, "I killed her." Though not with my own hands, he thought. I remember that much. I think I do. I was drunk; it's blurred; even later when I must have been sober . . .

He had always felt repentant after a spree, after some action of which he had been ashamed, the repentance lasting as long as the hangover, a little longer, and then not gone but submerged under the recurring pressures that drove him. And this time? This time he had put himself in something he could not get out of by changing his mind, by mounting a horse and riding away or buying another jug of whiskey. Because I had to, he thought. Because it was my last chance and I knew it. Only I didn't know what I was getting into. And if I had known?

For that, as yet, he had no answer.

The line did not move into the mess tent. The Negro cook stood with his dipper in his hand, waiting, an unarmed guard beside him. The lantern burned overhead against the early April night. The men stood in line holding their buckets, and all of them, including Mayfield now, understood the delay meant they were waiting for Ryan Durrance because someone was to be whipped.

He came across the compound, carrying Black Annie coiled in his hand, Seton with him. There was moonlight and they could see him even before he reached the mess tent and the light of the lanterns, wearing the old but neat black suit, the black tie against the pale white V of his shirt. He stopped, looking down the line of men. He let the strap of Black Annie fall, uncoiling, to brush against the ground at his foot. "All right," he said, and pointed the maimed left hand at Joe Booker.

"Wait!" Mayfield said. He had not known he was going to speak. And then again, "Wait! Why——?"

Durrance looked at him. And Mayfield said, "This afternoon he was trying to help me. That was all. I——"

Durrance was not even looking at him now but at Booker again. "Step out here." And after the Negro had moved forward, "Drop your pants."

Booker unfastened the short length of plowline that served him as a belt. The striped convict trousers slipped down around his ankles. Above them two links of the ankle chain and the iron ring tied just below his knee were visible. "All right," Durrance said.

It was a position they had all seen often enough. There was no need to dictate it. Booker knelt, his forearms folded on the ground, his head resting on them. The blows fell across the small of the back, the buttocks and thighs. There was the sound of the blows and Ryan Durrance's voice counting in the spring darkness and somewhere, all the time, a whippoorwill crying against the night.

"Twenty-five," Durrance said. He did not move but the strap shook a little in his hand. "Get up."

Booker got up slowly. He was trying to hold his trousers with one hand and they slipped and he had to stoop for them again. Against his dark flesh the blood showed only slightly. Then he was straight again, holding his trousers.

"Get back in the line," Durrance said. His head moved so he was looking at Mayfield. "All right," he said. "The nigger was just trying to help you, was he? And who were you trying to help?" His voice had a faintly shrill note, and he tried to stop it and heard himself saying again, "Who were you trying to help? You're the man wanted to get on the chaingang, the man wasn't going to let anybody keep him off, but wouldn't tell—" He stopped then. "Step out," he said. "Maybe this is what you were so anxious for." And told himself, Quit at twenty-five. Quit. And felt his muscles begin to jerk, to struggle against his mind, the strap swinging faster now, and faster.

"Mr. David," Booker said. He spoke in a whisper. They were in the sleeping tent, locked alongside the other prisoners to the center chain. The lantern at one end of the tent had burned out and not been refilled since there was moonlight; but inside the tent it was semidark. Some of the men snored; others lay like dead beneath the folded canvas. "Take this, Mr. David."

"What is it?"

"Axle grease. Smear some of it on you where the skin is broke. Then it won't stick to your pants and shirt and bust open again."

"You?" Mayfield asked.

"I got some too. I stole it this afternoon off the wheel of the mess wagon."

"You knew then he was going to whip us?"

"I figured he would. I figured Mr. Seton would tell him."

It was awkward, without getting up, to reach inside his trousers and find where the flesh had broken under the strap and smear the grease. Beside him he could hear rather than see Booker moving beneath the canvas, hear his breathing. Then they were still again. But Mayfield did not go back to sleep. He could feel the pain across his buttocks and legs, though it was not this kept him awake. He could remember clearly untying his rope belt, kneeling in the merged light of moon and lanterns. The whipping itself seemed remote. It seemed almost as if he had felt the blows given to Joe Booker more than those he received.

"Joe, how did you get here?"

"Where you mean?"

"Here. On this chaingang. What are you charged with?"

"Selling moonshine."

"All right," Mayfield said. They lay facing one another, only inches apart, though in the darkness the Negro's face was barely visible. "It doesn't matter how. But why? You knew what you were getting into, like you knew to keep me from asking for my own shoes back that first day."

"You and me been together all our lives."

"That's no answer," Mayfield said, thinking, What if it had been the other way, if Joe had got arrested somewhere that I couldn't get him out and he was going to the chaingang? I'd have done what I could to get him out, but I wouldn't have gone with him. It wouldn't even have occurred to me.

"Because you couldn't have helped me none on a chain-gang," Booker said as if he had read the other man's thoughts. "Like I couldn't have helped you get out of jail if you'd of wanted to get out. Mr. Howard Cason would of had to done that. Like he couldn't help you none in here. Besides, I was to blame for you being here."

"You? How?"

"I was supposed to look after you. It was my job. If I'd done it right you couldn't of killed that woman."

So he was trying to help me, Mayfield thought. And he winds up here. And Clytee—remembering suddenly her voice saying, "Would it make you feel better? Would it make you happy?" And then Ryan Durrance saying, "Who were you trying to help?" Thinking, Who have I ever tried to help? One person, there ought to be one, not just to be polite to, but that I thought about, cared about, wanted to help. Not even myself, he thought. Not even myself.

CHAPTER 18

Ryan Durrance noted with a kind of slow, controlled fury that his hand was shaking. The pencil with which he was making out the day's record slipped from his fingers for the second time, and Frank Seton said, "What's the matter, Ryan? Looks like you can't hold a pencil as tight as you did that whip."

There were two other guards in the shack. On the table beside Durrance's ledger was a lamp, a pack of worn cards, a can of oil, and parts of a rifle one guard was cleaning. The man cleaning the rifle said, "The way you was laying into that Mayfield I didn't think you was going to quit at twenty-five."

"I'd told him a quarter crop," Durrance said. He had the pencil in his hand again.

"Sure," the guard said. "Before he started taking up for that nigger."

"What you reckon is between them two?" Seton said. "They don't look like girl-boys, but——"

"They're not," Durrance said. He hadn't known he was going to answer.

"Well, it's a good thing they wasn't in that camp down to Clara," the guard who was cleaning the rifle said. He was a tall, gaunt man named Zim. "That Cap'n Gruenther down there loves to whip two and three of 'em at a time, sometimes four and five. He handcuffs 'em together round a tree in the middle of the compound, buck naked, and then he makes 'em go round and round, sort of ring around the rosie, while he stands in one place with his strap."

"He's the one has fits," the third guard said.

"Man, you aint never seen a fit like he has. I was down there once when he had four convicts going round that tree: three of 'em white and one nigger. All naked. I thought he was going to beat 'em to death. Until all at once he fell over on the ground hisself, wriggling like a snake and screaming. Only it wasn't real screaming. I don't know just what it was, except it was the goddamnedest noise I ever heard."

The other guard said, "I heard about him. He's epileptic."

"Maybe," Zim said. "Only he don't have fits when he aint been whipping somebody. Not that I ever saw."

"I seen him have one once," Seton said, and laughed. "It reminded me of one time I was up in Georgia; gone up there to bring back a nigger runaway. I never did find that son of a bitch, but out in the woods where he was supposed to be I found this long-legged yellow gal and so I figured I might just as well get me something out of the trip. We was out in the pine woods, right on the side of a real steep gully like they got up there, with trees along the edge and the bank about a inch deep in pine needles and slick as two eels in a barrel of snot. Well, this nigger gal was like that one in the story what told the fellow in the cottonpatch, 'Don't take off your hat and lay it down here 'cause us might not come back this way.' Godamighty! It was like riding a bucking mule. Just about the time we hit the short rows she let out a yell you could of heard a half mile, 'Jesus! Here I come!' And so help me God, there we went—right over the edge of that gully and shooting down the side of it 'bout a mile a minute. It was too late for either one of us to quit what we was doing and there wasn't no way to stop shooting down the hill without quitting. So we just kept right on going, both ways. It was sort of like flying in two directions at one time."

Seton rocked with laughter at the memory, then stopped. "That's what this Cap'n Gruenther minded me of with his fit. Like he was flying in two directions."

Zim had quit cleaning his rifle. "You mean that's the way he gets his fun?"

"I don't know. But there's some crazy sons of bitches in this world. What about it, Ryan?"

"I've heard of Gruenther," Durrance said. "I never saw him." He stood up. "I think I'll go home," he said, and turned and went out, leaving the ledger open on the table.

He had not planned to ride home tonight, and now he did not ask himself why he had suddenly changed his mind. His horse had been unsaddled; he saddled it again, his hands shaking so he had difficulty with the cinch. I'm always nervous after there's been trouble out here, he thought; and told himself immediately there had been no real trouble. There had been a couple of men to whip, that was all.

He did not want to think about it. He was not accustomed to introspective thinking. A man did what he had to do and that was it. He did his job, what he was capable of, what he thought was right. He kept camp records because that had been part of his instructions, although he knew that most captains ignored this and there was no checkup. He did not lie or cheat and he had never taken anything from the camp or from any convict. Many of his guards did; he knew that. It was a generally accepted practice and if they wanted to do it, all right. He didn't. That was the way he was and no need to puzzle over the reason.

Only of late things had begun to worry him. Thoughts he did not want had begun to crowd into his head at odd times. They snapped at his mind like dogs at a cornered bobcat; they rushed him and snapped and jumped backward, circling in the darkness, then leaping in again.

Everytime I have to whip somebody, he thought, looking down at his hands. And getting worse. Like I can't control them, can't stop them shaking after it's over. It's because I'm tired, he told himself, pushing the snapping dog back into darkness.

There was a moon, the country naked and barren beneath it until he reached the first pines. It's late to be starting home, he thought. Rose won't expect me this late. She'll be in bed. Asleep. And I don't really want to go home anyway. Only . . .

Only he had wanted to get away from the camp, away from Seton noticing the dropped pencil, from talk of whippings, and that story about Captain Gruenther down at Clara. Maybe Gruenther was like that. There was enough gossip. Mr. Ivy'd said something once about having to warn Gruenther about beating prisoners until they couldn't work. The trouble was getting a good woods rider to take his place. A lot of good turpentine men couldn't handle convicts. Because you had to keep discipline, and if you didn't want to hang them by the thumbs or stake one out in a ant hill, which was more than likely to kill him, there wasn't nothing a chaingang understood except the whip.

That's why I use it, he thought—and remembered the guard saying, "The way you was laying into that Mayfield I didn't think you was going to quit at twenty-five." But I did, he thought. I did even (the thought leaping at him before he could stop it) even if I did think I wasn't going to, wasn't going to be able to. Because every time now when I start it's like sliding down a hill, going faster and faster and not able to stop. Only not like that story of Frank's; that has nothing to do with it; it's not in that part of my body, he thought honestly, accurately. It's in my head, as if suddenly I hadn't said twenty-five but fifty and not fifty but a hundred, and I had to hurry because . . .

His mind stopped there. He had no answer. And he wanted none. He wanted merely to forget the whole thing. He turned in the saddle looking around him. This was a part of the woods the men were currently working, the turpented faces on the pines about shoulder high. He could see some of them where the moonlight came in pale waterfalls between the trees, could smell the fresh rosin on the spring night. Good trees, he

thought. We'll get better'n fifteen hundred, maybe two thousand gallons of gum to a crop every month. So I better run a extra dipping crew through here next week.

For a minute he was at peace considering the work, the need for a couple of new trusties to drive the wagons, for new dip buckets, thinking, Maybe I can get a couple of dozen nail kegs from Ed Grismer. Have another mule sent up from . . . Rose said she could tell when I had whipped a man by the way I made love.

There had been no warning. The thought had simply merged with the others before he could stop it. I didn't know what she meant. I still don't. There's not but one way; at least that's not what she meant. I know that much. It was something else, like you can sometimes know a man is drunk when you look at him: he can be standing perfectly still, not staggering, not even talking, just standing there and you know he's drunk as soon as you lay eyes on him. But how—?

He could not stop it. The thought was there, and he looked at it in amazement as if it were something tangible and strange rearing suddenly in the dark road ahead of him—stared at it, and then rejected it as he might have rejected a violation of the law of gravity, thinking, Maybe there are times when I get caught in whipping a man, like being caught in fast water, in a hurricane, blown and can't stop, like I've got to kill him because I hate him and can't stop until I do kill him. I must be going crazy.

He thought this last not in connection with the whippings and their effect on him, but because he found himself trapped in thoughts he could neither understand nor control, thinking, Hate then? Hate and want to kill, or almost? Only I don't hate them ten minutes before, don't hate, don't care one way or the other until I start swinging the whip and then something breaks, slips loose, a door opens somewhere and this comes out I didn't even know was there, was inside me.

Stop it! he thought, checking his thoughts with an almost

physical violence in the same way he had stopped swinging the whip. Stop it. Stop it. He was clutching the McClellan saddle with both hands as if in danger of falling off. It was late. There were no lights in the houses he passed and none in his own. She's asleep, he thought. I'll try not to wake her up. But she sleeps so light, always listening for the baby.

Rose Durrance was only half asleep. She'd had to get up and put little Ellie on the pot, then tuck her in the bed again. Now back in her own bed, sunk in the feather mattress, she was drifting slowly toward sleep when she heard the horse pass alongside the house toward the barn. It's Ryan! she thought with surprised happiness almost as sharp as that with which she had watched him tie his horse to the picket fence of her home when they were courting.

She got out of bed. Because of the moonlight there was no need to light a lamp. She went quickly, barefooted, a little chill in her nightgown, to stand on the back porch.

He was at the barn now; she saw him open the door and move forward into darkness, leading the horse. Inside the barn there was the spurt of a match, the yellow upswelling glow of a lantern with his figure dark against it, and then, as he raised the lantern to hang it on a nail, she saw his face. But even before then she had begun to think, It's one o'clock; it's after one now—and the happiness she had felt at the sound of his horse began to turn cold in her chest. At the sight of his face it changed into something very close to fear.

She had been eighteen when she met Ryan Durrance at the Wednesday evening prayer meeting where she had gone with the two cousins she was visiting. They were singing, "Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save." It was a song that had always stirred her, both because of the music and the picture it brought: the sailor

clinging to a spar, almost dead, without hope, and then—this part was never quite clear—she had reached him and somehow he was on the beach with his head in her lap and she was giving him a drink of water, and the beach was the one near Panama City where she had gone with her family once on a vacation fishing trip.

She saw Ryan and stopped singing. He was halfway across the small church from her in his neat black suit, his black hair neatly combed, his face bent forward, the song book in his hand. There was the scar at the left corner of his mouth, but this did not alter the fact that he was the most handsome man she had ever seen; instead it fitted in with the picture of the shipwrecked sailor lying on the beach with his head in her lap. Also, because of the scar, she knew immediately who he must be.

She touched her cousin Ellie (the one for whom the baby was named) on the arm and, very carefully, behind the song book so no one could see, she pointed and whispered, "Who's that?"

"The one I told you about, who killed that nigger. The ticket agent for the railroad."

"That's who I thought."

It was at this point that Durrance turned his head and saw her looking at him, her finger still pointed behind the song book. Immediately she looked away, feeling her face go crimson. But then her eyes moved, as cautiously as a stalking cat, and met his again and this time there wasn't anything to do but smile.

He had walked home with her and her cousins, the two cousins soon a few yards ahead. They had sat on the front steps, and if there were mosquitoes (there generally were, hordes of them) she never remembered.

She would have married him any time that he asked. Maybe she would have done more (sometimes she wondered about this), but he never asked. It seemed to her that he was

in every way the kind of man a girl could love and be proud of and not just because he was good looking. He was attentive, steady, with a steady job, and strong and brave. He did not talk much, but he listened. If there was anything that bothered her, it was that he had no sense of humor. When she made a joke of some kind he would smile, or laugh; but it was obvious this was because the laugh was expected of him and he was a conformist in this way just as in the neat black suits he wore. But this did not trouble her seriously; it fitted in with her conception of quiet courage.

So they were married and Ryan proved an ardent if brusque conformist lover. Rose was as happy as she had thought she would be. She cried a good deal the night he went in old Mrs. Waters' rooming house and brought out Hardy Moore, who'd already shot three people. But since the danger was already over when she heard about it, the tears were mostly from relief. And pride too. There wasn't another man in town with the courage to do what Ryan had done, and every man and every woman in town knew it. Then he took the job as town marshal. That frightened her, but pleased her too since it was a recognition of his courage and ability. She'd never forget the night he lost the two fingers on his left hand in a gun fight. That night, when he came back from the doctor's, she had begged him to give up the job of marshal, knowing he would not do it and proud that he wouldn't ("Somebody has got to be marshal, honey. Somebody has to do it.") at the same time she was terrified of what might happen.

Then he took the job at the convict camp. And it was at this point, Rose thought, touching on this instinctively rather than by logic, that the trouble started. She hadn't wanted him to take the job, even though it did pay more than being town marshal and working for the railroad at the same time. She shared the public distaste for anyone who worked at those convict camps. Maybe they did save the state money; but it was generally admitted the whole system of selling prisoners

like slaves was so bad that the best thing for decent people to do was ignore it. Also, the job at the railroad had been steady, with promise of promotion. The job with Mr. Ivy could end any time Mr. Ivy's contract with the state wasn't renewed. And it kept Ryan away from home so much. The camps were always moving, sometimes only a few miles but sometimes to another county. The next move might take Ryan so far away he wouldn't hardly ever get home.

But that was only part of it, she thought, watching the glow of the lantern through the open door to the barn. (She could not see Ryan now, only his shadow, huge and distorted: he was currying his horse, the shadow of his arm moving up and down, black against the yellow lantern light.) The wind blew her nightgown against her, but she felt colder than the air.

There was something happening to him out at that camp, she thought. Something changing him. Before he took that job she had never known him to lose his temper in any way, never known him to raise his voice. Now, though it happened very rarely, there were times when, suddenly, he would shout at the children or at her. Before, he had disciplined little Ryan as he might have a puppy, with affection and firmness; twice in the last year he had slapped him, and Donnie once, hard, for no reason. Once he had yelled at the baby so loud it scared her almost into hysterics. And then he'd got up and walked out of the house. Just walked out, without a word.

It was the job that did it, she thought. Living and working around convicts and guards, some of them not much better than the convicts they guarded: the whole thing evil and the evil contagious like some kind of disease: evil breeding evil, the way everything breeds more of its own kind. And now since that man Mayfield, the one who killed the moonshiner's wife, had been sent to the camp, Ryan had been more changed than ever. But different, in a way she did not understand. For one thing, Ryan talked about him more than she had ever heard him talk before. And there didn't seem to be any reason. For

a while she had wondered if Ryan had known that Clytee Mawson himself, if he had been slipping out there to see her and hated this Mayfield for having killed her. But she had decided that was impossible.

It's almost as if he were afraid of this Mayfield, she thought. Except that was even more impossible than the other. Ryan wasn't afraid of anybody. And how could he be afraid of a man on the chaingang who had armed guards standing over him day and night?

The light in the barn went out, the doorway changing from yellow to black. Ryan came out of the blackness into the moonlight. He was carrying the whip coiled in his right hand. But there was nothing unusual about that, she thought. He kept it on his saddle when he was in the woods; at home he hung it on a nail on the back porch. She watched him come slowly across the backyard. When he reached the steps she said, "I didn't expect you home tonight, not this late."

He stopped. "Hello, honey. I didn't see you." He stood there, looking up at her as if finding her here had somehow changed his plans. "I thought you'd be asleep. I was going to try to slip in without waking you."

"I had to get up with Ellie. I'd just gone back to bed and was still awake when I heard the horse."

"Is anything wrong with Ellie?"

"She had to wee-wee. That's all."

"You'll catch cold. Go on back to bed."

"I'm not cold." And then, "It's so late. Did anything go wrong at the camp?"

"Nothing." He came up the steps then and went past her and hung Black Annie on its nail. "I stayed to make out my reports. And then I just decided I'd ride on home. You better get back to bed, honey."

"You want something to eat? I didn't save any supper for you because I didn't think you were coming home tonight. But it won't take a minute to fix—"

"I don't want anything."

"It won't take but a minute."

"I'm not hungry. But you must be cold."

"No," she said, feeling the cold around her mouth, at the muscles of her jaws. And then she said, not wanting to and not able to keep from it, "You whipped somebody tonight."

"That fellow Mayfield, and his nigger." He went past her into the unlighted house and on to the bedroom. The windows were misted with moonlight. He sat on his side of the bed and began to take off his clothes. "He was soldiering on the job all day, Frank said. And when Frank prodded him, the nigger started at him with a puller."

"I thought you said he—this Mayfield—worked as hard as he could."

"He's working whenever I see him." There was a sudden edge to his voice. "I can't be everywhere in the woods at one time. I can't watch all of them all the time. Maybe Frank was lying. Maybe he just wanted them whipped. But a captain has got to back up his guards or get rid of them."

"Of course." She was in the bed now, the cover pulled up around her. But she was still cold. "Frank has more of his prisoners punished than any of your guards, doesn't he?"

"They all got to have a man disciplined sometimes." And then, "I reckon he does."

"Why don't you get rid of him?"

"He's got four kids. And he aint good for anything except guarding. That little bit of land he's got won't raise anything more'n collards. Besides, he's a good guard. He gets work out of his men—as long as you don't let him beat them up to where they can't work."

He pulled the nightgown over his head and stood up in the moon-faint darkness, his back turned to her, and got out of his underwear and let the gown fall around him. He folded the underwear on a chair over the back of which his trousers had already been carefully hung. And said suddenly, violently,

half shouting it into the stillness, "I didn't arrest them! I didn't send 'em out there! They wouldn't be there if they hadn't broken the law!"

"Please, Ryan. You'll wake the children."

"All right." He still stood with his back to her and she could hear his breathing. "All right," he said again, his voice under control now. And then, "You told me once you could tell when I'd had to whip a convict—by the way I made love. What did you mean?"

She had never seen him like this. She loved him because he was still Ryan, still the same flesh and bone and blood she had loved for ten years now. And she was afraid too, aware that here inside the flesh and bone and blood was something more, something changed that could change all the other with it. What this something was she could not know: a darkness, void, mysterious as the void in which the earth itself had first been fashioned and in which the soul of man was fashioned or changed, as monstrous or beautiful or terrible as the creating of a new world. And she did not want change, except back to what her life and his had been when they were first married and before he ever went to work at that convict camp.

She said, "I don't know what you mean, Ryan. I don't remember."

"Yes, you do. You said it one night right after we got through: that you knew I'd whipped somebody; you said that was the way you could tell."

Now she could hear her own breathing. "Yes. Because it was like you didn't want to do what you were doing; as if you were doing it not because you loved me or even just wanted to make love to me—but because you hated me."

"Hated you? I've never hated you, honey."

"I know that. I just meant that—that . . ."

"But that's crazy." And thought, Maybe we are both going crazy.

But now he had reached the limit of his power to probe in the same way that David Mayfield had previously reached the limit of his ability to suffer. He was, suddenly, as exhausted as if he had been fighting violently, physically, for hours. He crossed to the bed and got in and pulled the cover up. Crazy, he thought. And then thought, using profanity even unconsciously for one of the few times in his life, To hell with it. I'm tired. I didn't know how tired I was. I'm just tired. He rolled half on one side, then onto his back again, and was already asleep.

CHAPTER 19

The new guard at the camp was named Carl Ogden and he was very proud of his job. He was twenty years old, a tall, lean boy with shaggy blond hair and very blue eyes. His father was a sawmill man; the boy had been raised around sawmill camps in south Georgia and north Florida and had worked in them himself since he was twelve years old. He had expected (if he had ever consciously, mentally, expected anything) to go on working in them. Then on a Saturday afternoon Ryan Durrance stopped him on the main street of Pinetree and asked if he wanted to be a guard out at the convict camp. Ray Tyner had quit, and somebody had to be hired to take his place.

The boy hesitated. He knew there were some persons who did not approve of the job of convict guard, though he had never understood why. Whether the system itself was right or wrong had never crossed his mind; it was "the government" and existed, beyond either wrong or right, like night and day. Also, there was something about the job which instinctively fascinated him, even though he knew very little about it. It was government work, with an element of adventure and responsibility about it, like being a soldier. So he hesitated a long moment before he said, "I don't think I can, Mr. Durrance. I don't have no gun." His blue eyes rose swiftly to Durrance's, and shifted again. "Maybe I could borrow Daddy's. It aint much, but—" He shook his head. "Anyhow, he'd all the time be wanting it back."

"We furnish the rifle," Durrance said. "A Winchester thirty-thirty. Repeater."

After that the boy did not even ask about wages. He was a good sawmill hand; he could make better money in the sawmills. But he could not make money enough to soon own a Winchester repeating rifle.

Even so, standing now outside the compound fence, holding the rifle cradled in both arms across his chest, stroking the barrel now and again with the fingers of his right hand, it was not the gun in which he took the greatest pride. It was the job itself, of which the rifle was only a symbol: the responsibility that had been given to him. He looked across the fence to the single deformed pine and the long tent in which the convicts slept chained. He could see them only as a blur and he thought of them in this same way, not as men but as menace, a threat to the people of Pine County, to the State of Florida itself. All over the county men and women were asleep, trusting him, depending on him. He looked at the tent, lit vaguely by a single lantern, and thought of a figure arising, detaching itself somehow from the chain, and running, toward him or away—it did not matter—since either way the threat was the same: huge, vague, impersonal. And he thought of raising the rifle, the perfect balance of it, the way it fit against his shoulder, the way the barrel swung to cover the running figure, the sound and recoil of the shot. And then the thing that made it so tremendous: the figure falling, the knowledge of death, and with that knowledge the split moment in which the heart seemed to stop beating, the blood quit moving in the veins, leaving only the hunter's soaring instant of mingled pride and release and awe and godlike power.

There aint much chance one of them will get off that chain, he thought, just as on the occasions when he had been able to borrow or steal his father's shotgun he had thought, There aint much chance I'll find a deer, preparing himself for the disappointment yet still hoping. Because it could happen, he

thought. They wouldn't be paying me money to stand guard with this rifle if it couldn't happen sometime.

"Well, look," Bass said. "We got a bunch of newcocks in camp."

It was Saturday and the prisoners had been brought back to the compound shortly before dark. Unchained, Mayfield had sprawled on the ground to rest and now Bass squatted beside him. "Three of 'em," Bass said.

Mayfield raised his head. There was a group of men in the mess tent, but in the fading light he could tell little about them. He rolled on his side, careful, since his legs and back were still sore from the whipping of three days before. "That word 'newcock.' I know you mean new prisoners; but where'd the word come from?"

"You never been in prison anywhere else, or you wouldn't need to ask. They all use it—at least every one I ever been in. Because in all the big prisons—I don't mean the little county jails where they just hold you a few weeks or a month or so—all the old timers watch for the new ones and try to find a nice new boy so they can punk him. First time I ever went to prison was in Massachusetts. They got one big cell up front holds about sixteen men. Supposed to be nothing in it but newcomers. But there's always three or four old timers manage to stay in it." He stopped. The long loose jowls puckered and he spat. "That's one thing about these Florida chaingangs. There aint much of that goes on. A day in those turpentine woods and a man is too tired for anything else. I guess I aint even dreamed about a woman, no less want to bother with another man, since they sent me back from headquarters camp."

He stood up. "Mess line's forming."

Mayfield got slowly to his feet. He was thinking, Maybe any

place you are, there's some place worse; for any degradation there's a worse one.

"You know what I dream about?" Bass said. "If I aint too tired to dream at all. I was in a camp on the Suwannee River when a man ran. The guard had a clean shot at him but he didn't take it. At least not at first. He just yelled for another guard to watch us and then he and one of the other guards ran after the fellow. Because they had him cornered in a bend of the river. They waited for him to jump in and start swimming. The river must of been 'bout a hundred yards wide and the guards lined up on the bank. From where I was I could see the whole thing because the current was bringing the man back downstream. He'd dive and swim under water long's he could. Then his head would pop up and one guard would shoot, then the other. Then the fellow would dive again and they'd wait for his head to come up again. It was like shooting at a bottle floating downstream. And the third shot one of 'em broke it."

They had reached the mess line. "That's what I dream about. Because the next time I run it's going to be where there's a river." The little parrot eyes glittered at Mayfield. "Only I want it to be a camp with another captain. This Durance will follow you to hell, if the dogs can track you."

The mess line started to move, and it was then, watching the line bend past the cookstove, that he first saw the boy. In this group where no one, not even the guard, had made any pretense of shaving for a week, the boy's lack of a beard made him look even younger than he was, and he could not have been more than sixteen. He was clean, at least for his surroundings, slim, blond, with something of the look of a race-horse about him: flared nostrils and frightened eyes and his lips held tight against his teeth. Holding his mess bucket in both hands he moved along the table and sat down near the end, his back to the mess line.

He's just a kid, Mayfield thought, startled. What did he do to get here?

He reached the cookstove, got his helping of the peas, fat-back, and cornbread that varied usually only on Sundays, and not much then. When he turned he saw the boy at the far end of the table; he was looking aghast into the bucket in front of him, his mouth slightly open, the spoon clutched in his right hand. Mayfield went to sit beside him. "It doesn't taste like much, but you can live on it. You'll need to eat a little bit of it."

"It's rotten!"

"Keep your voice down," Mayfield said, his own just above a whisper. "You don't want the guard to hear you complaining."

"But——" He stopped, his head bent above the bucket, his lips very tight against his teeth, his whole body bent and taut as a drawn bowstring. Tears formed suddenly in his eyes, and he shut his eyes tight and the tear squeezed out under the lid onto the cheek.

Except for Mayfield no one noticed. Up and down the table the men ate steadily, heads bent over the buckets. Mayfield ate also, saving his cornbread for the last. Then he stopped. He put the cornbread on the table beside the boy. "Eat that. It's not as bad as the rest."

The boy looked at the bread. He did not look at Mayfield. "You go to hell," he said. When he got up and took his bucket to join the line at the washtub the bread was still on the table. Mayfield picked it up and ate it.

Later, when they had been chained for the night, when he was almost asleep, Mayfield heard the sobs. They were muffled, not as loud as the whimper of wind against the tent, but he could hear them. And hearing them he could not sleep. He lay on his back looking up into the lantern-tinted dimness inside the tent and the darkness outside thinking, Fifteen, sixteen, not more than seventeen, probably not that. You feel

things worse then, are more lost, lonely then, maybe because you haven't got used to it, because you know you are supposed to be a man and you're not, just lost. He felt an almost overwhelming compassion, tenderness, for the unseen boy crying in the darkness and a terrible need to help—until the old habits of thought asserted themselves. Help? How could I help him? What could I do for him? What have I ever managed to do for anybody, even Joe, Laura, the ones that loved me, except cause them trouble? He didn't even want the bread I offered him.

And thought suddenly, with a kind of amazement, But I offered it to him. Maybe I gave my cake and ate it too, but I gave it, or tried to give it. For probably the first time in my life I gave anything I wanted myself.

For a moment he felt downright proud of himself. But he was too weary to consider anything for long.

CHAPTER 20

On Sunday afternoons the huge Negro convict called Reverend preached in the mess tent. He had been born in slavery; later he had been a part-time gardener (and a very good one) for a half-dozen Tallahassee white families, and on Sundays a sort of catch-as-catch-can preacher. He had never been in any serious trouble with the law, and his Sunday and Wednesday night sermons consisted largely of extolling its majesty and warning his listeners against any infringement of it.

For more than twenty years he was, at least unofficially, married to a woman who took in laundry for many of the same families for whom the Reverend acted as gardener. They raised a number of children, all of them taught the Reverend's respect for law and order. Then his wife died and, guided more by the flesh than reason, his next choice fell on a long-legged, high-breasted girl in her twenties.

When she began to disappear from home the Reverend did not beat her, but merely lectured her. When he caught her with a man he held them (one with each powerful hand, as if they had been children) and preached to them. Unfortunately, this merely convinced both of them they could carry on with impunity.

Now the Reverend began to report them to the police, driving each time with his rickety wagon and gaunted mule past the state capitol, past the tall marble columns and great white steps, and on to the police station. Each time he drove past, day or night, he removed his hat, just as he had been doing as

long as he could remember. He would remove it again when he entered the police station.

However, he got little help from the police. They listened to his complaints politely enough, and grinned at him and at one another, and asked, "What are we going to arrest him for, Reverend? What are we going to charge him with? It's not rape, is it?"

"No sir," the Reverend said. "It ain't rape. But it's adultery, and adultery's against the laws of God and man."

"But what proof have you got?" they asked him. "We can't arrest a man without proof. Have you ever seen 'em?"

"I seen him at my house. I seen him setting with his feet under my kitchen table, eating my vittles. He's there right now."

"There's no law against that," they told him. "You're going to have to catch 'em in bed together."

"Even then," one policeman said, "it'd just be your word against theirs. Adultery is a mighty hard thing to prove, Reverend."

It was the fifth time he had come here. He stood looking at them for a long moment, then put on his hat, still inside the police station, and turned and walked out. As he drove past the capitol he turned his head and looked at it, and rode on, his hat still on his head.

A block from his house he tied his mule to a neighbor's fence. On foot he circled his house and came at it from the back. It was a dark night without moonlight. He went quietly up the back steps and stood there for a while listening. Then he took out the Barlow knife that he always kept razor sharp for the pruning of bushes, and pushed the door open. It was a two-room cabin; there was no light in the back room, but a lamp burned in the front and enough light came through the doorway for him to see the bed. The bed's occupants, however, were too occupied to notice him.

The man made no sound at all, and neighbors would testify

later they heard only one brief shriek from the Reverend's young wife, a cry that ended as suddenly as it began.

He left them there, briefly, and went and got his wagon and brought it to the back door. Then he lifted the two of them at one time (He would tell the police, "They warn't heavy, no sir; but I had some trouble keeping her head from falling off.") and carried them out and put them in the wagon.

This was on a Saturday night. Tallahassee's white Sunday morning churchgoers were startled to find the bodies, still in the same position in which the Reverend had found them, on the handsome white marble steps of the state capitol. But now, even if they had been alive, the man would have lost both interest and ability in his occupation, the proof of this being displayed on the middle of his back.

It was more than Tallahassee could condone. Had the Reverend merely left his victims in the bed where he killed them and called the police, the odds are there would never have been a trial, and certainly no conviction. But under the circumstances not even the families for which he had worked all his life felt free to defend him. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, which would normally have meant five to six years had there been anyone to request a pardon for him. But the memory of the black bodies on the white steps in the Sunday morning sunlight outlasted any sense of obligation his former employers may have felt. The story persisted as a legend long after the Reverend himself was forgotten.

On the chaingang he continued to preach. His Sunday afternoon audiences came and went as the spirit moved them. In the mess tent some of them would listen and some would sleep, some would play cards or work at mending the convict uniforms or doctoring the festering wounds from leg chains or whippings with stolen axle grease or whatever might be available. None of this troubled the Reverend, whose sermons were as motley as his audience.

"In the Bible," the Reverend was saying, "it says the Lord

told Noah to make him a ark out of gopher wood. I don't know nothing 'bout gopher wood, except I reckon it don't grow in Florida. At least I ain't never seen it. But the Lord told Noah, 'You pitch the ark over with pitch, inside and out.' And that pitch was just the same kind of pitch us make over at the still. We had a white preacher come here once say Noah made it just the same way us do. He cut him some boxes in some pine trees and he streak the trees with a hack and then he dip out the gum with a paddle and took it to the still. The big difference was Noah warn't using no chaingang labor. At least that was the big difference to the folks making it. It didn't make no difference to the pitch. That white preacher say our pitch is just as good as what Noah made, and I reckon it is. Now what I'm getting at," the Reverend said, "is how it shows something good can come out of something bad if the Lord wants it that way."

Mayfield sat halfway down the table, looking out into the compound where Enod Parker stood staring off into space. Parker's lips worked silently, framed in the mass of his untrimmed beard. After a moment he moved restlessly away.

"Don't ask me how come," the Reverend said. "The Lord got some strange ways. He make a rabbit able to outrun any man ever lived. Then he give the rabbit a white tail for the man to get a shot at. I reckon it's the Lord's way of keeping things sort of even. Only if that's it, the Lord and me got different ideas about what's even. But what I'm getting at is the Lord probably got some reason for having a chaingang even if don't none of us know what it is."

Mayfield stood up. Near the compound's deformed pine the boy who had arrived at the camp the night before was standing alone. Mayfield joined him, said, "Good afternoon."

The boy glanced at him for an instant, without recognition. After a long moment he said, "Hello."

"You haven't learned to tie up your ankle chain. It'll cause you a lot of trouble that way."

Again the boy was a long time in answering. "What do you mean?"

"Look." He pulled up the striped leg of his convict uniform. His leg from ankle almost to the knee was still red, swollen, the skin looking thin as if on the point of bursting even though it was no longer raw. "You have to keep the band around the ankle wrapped. And tie the chain up to keep it out of the way. Here." He held out the rag and string.

The boy hesitated, then turned his head. "You don't have to give me anything. I'll take care of myself."

"Oh hell," Mayfield said. He was remembering Lenier Bass's explanation of the word "newcock" and wondered if something of this sort had happened to the boy. Or was he prompted merely by pride, or fear? "Look," Mayfield said again, pulling his right trouser leg halfway up his calf. "See that? You're going to have trouble enough with that iron, even if you take care of it. I know. When I first came here somebody showed me how to wrap it, and probably saved my leg. I'm just trying to repay the favor. Now sit down, and I'll show you how to wrap the thing so it won't come loose."

The boy sat down. When the leg iron was wrapped, the chain tied below his knee so it would no longer drag, and the lesson learned, he said awkwardly, "Thank you. I—never been on a chaingang before."

"You're a bit young to be here now." He was touched by pity looking at the boy's thin, sullen face. "Have you ever done any hard work? Physical work?"

"Why?"

"Because tomorrow is going to be hard on you. It's hard on everybody at first. But if you can stick it out, it's not so bad after a while."

"I don't care what they do to me. I don't care if they kill me."

Mayfield did not answer. He could remember when he might have said this same thing, and actually meant it; now—

and this still seemed a little odd to him—he took a certain pride in merely being alive, in possessing strength enough to be alive under these circumstances.

"I was riding a freight train," the boy said suddenly, his voice thin. "That's all I was doing. But they snatched me off and claimed I'd broke in a warehouse, or something. I never broke in any warehouse."

"Did your family know? Couldn't they help?"

"I don't have any family." His voice broke. "Not any I'd ask for help."

"What's your name?"

Once more the boy was slow in answering. "Allen Wilson."

"Did you run away from home?"

He seemed to retreat physically into a shell. "What difference does it make?"

"None," Mayfield said. "When I was your age I used to run away; but I never had the guts to go very far." He was aware of an almost paternal tenderness toward the boy, of a desire to help—and of the vast inability of one human being to help another. And thought, But I can try. At least I can try.

Carl Ogden was on guard duty. He watched the convict come toward him across the compound, knowing that he would stop at the fence. Nobody was going to try to escape from here in broad daylight. On the other hand, there was always the chance one of them might have got hold of a pistol, or something. He took one step farther back from the fence, the rifle held in both arms across his chest.

Mayfield stopped just short of the fence. This boy's not much older than the other, he thought. He took off his cap. "I want permission to write a letter."

"What?" Carl said. In his brief time here he'd had no such requests. "What kind of letter?"

"To a lawyer. Ask Captain Durrance."

"Oh! You want me to leave my post to go ask him if you can write a letter?"

"No. But he's here today. I saw him a little while ago. You can call to him when he comes out of his office. I'll wait."

It was a half hour later. Durrance stood on the outside of the fence, Mayfield inside, the cap in his hands, saying, "I asked permission to write a letter."

"So you've had enough of it?" Durrance said. "Or have you heard the sheriff picked up Tom Mawson again for moon-shining?"

"Mawson?" It took a moment for him to remember, to understand, realizing suddenly that it had been a long while since he even thought of Clytee or of why he was here, occupied with the mere fact of being here. "No," he said. "I didn't want to write about myself. It was about that boy, the one who just came. He can't be over sixteen."

"Well?"

He hesitated, thinking it probably would do more harm than good to repeat the boy's claim of being innocent. "He'd run away from home. He probably didn't have a lawyer at his trial: he didn't have any money. I wanted to help him if I could."

"Help him?"

"And Joe Booker, the Negro who came here with me. I thought maybe if there was a fine to be paid rather than serving time I could pay it."

"There's no fine for murder."

"I know. It's not myself I want to write about."

"I see," Durrance said. He felt a muscle at the scarred corner of his mouth begin to twitch. "I'll send a trusty with pencil and paper."

Back in the mess tent the Reverend was saying, "There aint no sinners on this chaingang. There may be some sinners on the other side the fence; and I reckon everybody on this

side done been a sinner one time or another. But there aint no sinning here now, because there aint no chance to do none. So maybe the kind of fellow a man is depend on what he got a chance to be. I don't mean being free makes a man a sinner: it just give him the chance. Like being rich don't make a man bad, and it sure God don't make him good. It just give him the chance to be more of what he is natural."

Only he isn't answering the big question, Mayfield thought, waiting for his pencil and paper. Who is free? Who can be? Or is it only some people who find conventions a more strict jailer than an iron band around the leg?

Mac, the crippled trusty, brought the paper, a single lined white sheet torn from a notebook, and a pencil. As Mayfield started to write the Reverend's voice wavered, and stopped. No one was listening to him anyway; they were watching Mayfield. It was not the first letter to have been written in this camp, but it was the first in a long while to have been written openly, with the knowledge and consent of the Captain.

He had barely started to write when a convict sat down beside him, a small man with bad teeth and a face so seamed with wrinkles it had the look of a landscape eroded and gone to waste. "The coons dug him up," he said in a half whisper.

"What?" Mayfield asked.

"The coons. We didn't bury him deep enough. I told 'em that morning he weren't deep enough. You heard me. But they wouldn't let us bury him deeper. And when you get shot in the woods they just strip your clothes off and leave you. I've seen it lots of times. Just left for the coons and buzzards and wood rats."

"Oh," Mayfield said. He remembered now: this was the little man who'd put a rag over the face of the corpse he'd helped bury his first morning in camp.

"It weren't four days and they done dug up part of him," the little man said. "I guess you didn't see it then. But

you seen they wouldn't let us bury him right. You tell the Governor."

"The Governor?"

"That's who you writing, aint it?"

"No."

"Oh. . . ." He seemed to slump. "Well, you tell whoever it is. Maybe they can write." He put his hand on Mayfield's arm. "It aint right to leave a man naked in the woods for rats to eat. It aint right!"

The trusty said, "He aint going to get nothing writ if you don't leave him alone."

The convict departed. Mayfield finished his letter, gave it and the pencil to the trusty. When he left the mess tent he found Lenier Bass waiting for him. "Old Rats wanted you to write the Governor?"

"Yes."

"That's all he thinks of, not being buried deep enough to keep the rats and coons off. Me, I reckon once you're dead it don't matter. Though maybe that's another reason why next time I run I want to be close to a river. Though maybe rats and coons are no worse than catfish and crabs." His little black eyes jumped suddenly at Mayfield's face. "You think the Cap'n's really going to mail that letter, or he just wants to read it hisself?"

"I know it'll be censored. But he'll mail it, won't he?"

"How the hell do I know? I used to write letters. Maybe they weren't mailed, maybe the folks back home didn't want to know me any more. I never got any answer."

CHAPTER 21

"Joe," Mayfield said, "let's see if we can get that boy between us on the squad chain. He's going to need help."

"He's going to need more'n help, 'less he helps hisself more'n I think he is."

"We can try."

At four-thirty there was already a gray, sourceless light in the sky. They lined up on the squad chain with the boy between them, the trusties with the lighted pine torches at each end, the squads one after another leaving the compound, beginning to trot, a black and white river banked with flame flowing off into the morning darkness.

The boy proved stronger than he looked. For fifteen minutes he trotted without apparent difficulty. It's his age, Mayfield thought. He's going to make it all right. And then, without warning, Allen stopped. "I'm out of—" he said, and was jerked forward by the chain.

Both Mayfield and Booker tried to support him, keep him moving, but he wasn't trying to run. "I got to stop," he panted.

Frank Seton kicked him in the buttocks almost playfully. At the same time Mayfield and Booker had him on his feet again, moving again. They went on for another three minutes before the boy said again, "I got to stop."

Joe Booker's free hand was next the boy. He put his arm around him, tried to lift him, and in the same instant stumbled sharply. He began to vomit, even before he could release Allen and clap both hands against his stomach.

The line wavered and slowed to a walk. But the other squads were walking too now. Seton said, "What the hell's wrong with you? All that rich food you been eating?"

He did not expect an answer. They walked on, Booker holding both hands against his belly. Then after a few minutes they began to trot again.

It was during the brief rest before taking their pullers from the wagon and starting work that Mayfield had a chance to ask, "What happened, Joe?"

"A pain in my stomach." He grinned, a little bitterly. "I done had 'em before. Like Mr. Seton say, I reckon it's all them rich peas and rancid fatback I been eating."

"Does it still hurt?"

"It's all right now. But it sure God stopped me for a second."

The trusties had put out their torches now. Faint streaks of mist still flowed in places beneath the trees, but overhead the sky was turning light blue. Seton, who had been squatting with his back against a pine, stood up and made the customary morning joke. "It's time for you playboys to start earning your pay."

Again Allen Wilson proved stronger than he looked. He worked no harder than he had to, but he managed to keep working. His hands blistered, but the blisters did not break and bleed. He made it back to the camp without falling. He ate his supper.

And the next morning he did not get up. When the center chain was removed and the men started to rise—that weird, slow, animal-like half lifting, each man still bent to tie his ankle chain, stiff and numb from the night's sleep—the boy did not move. As the other men moved off toward the mess tent Mayfield stopped and touched him on the shoulder. "Allen."

"Go away."

"Get up."

"I can't. I'm sick."

He put his hand on the boy's forehead. There was no fever. "Get up, Allen."

"I told you. I'm sick. I want to see a doctor."

"There's no doctor here," Mayfield said. "He only comes once a month, or every other week sometimes. And if he doesn't find anything wrong with you, you get a quarter crop from Black Annie for every day you've missed work." The boy did not answer. Mayfield said, "You've never seen a man whipped, Allen. The working is easier."

"I don't care. I don't care what they do to me."

"Because you don't know what in the hell you are talking about," Mayfield said. He was surprised at his own anger. He reached and caught the boy under the arms and lifted him. "Now come on and eat."

Released, the boy sat down again. And Joe Booker said, "You can't tote him, Mr. David. I reckon he's just got to learn his own way."

"A half crop will kill him," Mayfield said. "Allen . . ." The boy turned and lay face down on the canvas.

The line before the mess tent that night did not move. The men stood in the early darkness, the still heat of early summer, and waited. They already knew. The word had passed from Mac, the crippled trusty whose work kept him in camp, and down the line: the doctor was here. There would be sick call after supper. But the doctor had already looked at the newcock who had refused to work.

They heard Durrance's voice, the guard at the gate, another voice which would be that of the doctor. "Reverend," Durrance said. He had come into the light now, Black Annie in his hand. The doctor stood a half step back of him, a large soft man with gray hair. "Get that newcock out of the tent," Durrance said.

"Yessir."

They waited. Abruptly Durrance said, "Dr. Rand got here today. There'll be sick call here in the mess tent after supper."

He was looking at Mayfield now, speaking directly toward him. "Any man who is really sick doesn't have to work. I've never made a man work when the doctor said he wasn't able. But if he is able, he's got to work. It's my job——" Shut up, he told himself. You don't have to explain. Shut up.

The Reverend with Allen Wilson came back into the light.

Mayfield did not move. He watched without actually seeing: the boy trying to rise after the first blow and held down then the way Parker had been: he heard the blows, Durrance's voice counting, the screams, the Reverend saying softly in the same rhythm, "All right, child; just a little more, child, all right, child," and then silence until Durrance's voice said thinly, "I want you to examine him, Doctor. I want you to see if he's been injured."

"Why, hell," the doctor said, "you ain't hurting nothing about him except his pride. His own mother probably whipped him worse than that. Or should anyhow."

"Examine him."

"Sure." He leaned over the boy, and straightened again immediately. "He can work tomorrow. Probably find it more comfortable than sitting down anyway."

"Sick call after supper," Durrance said. He and the doctor turned away together. But at the compound gate Durrance said, "Go on to the office, Doc. I'll be there in a minute." He turned to the left, walking fast now, almost running into the darkness until he reached the nearest tree and took hold of it with both hands. He could feel sweat breaking out all over him. His body felt soaked in it. I could have killed him, he thought. If the doctor hadn't been here I might have, might have kept right on swinging. . . .

Inside the compound the mess line had begun to move. Mayfield, pushed by the man back of him, moved with it,

thinking, There wasn't anything I could do. Anything I said would have just made it worse. Even if I had offered to take the whipping; it would have just got him whipped harder, and me too.

He left the mess line and went to where the boy still lay half naked on the ground. There were welts of blood across his buttocks and legs. Looking at them, Mayfield thought, So he'll work tomorrow. Because it's better than being beaten to death. We'll all work, for the same reason. So maybe they are right: it's the only reason we understand, the only reason anybody understands. Survival. Stay alive. Keep breathing. And after a while you find there is something to be proud of just in that. No, he thought, it's more than that. There's something besides that. Only I don't know what it is.

He stooped and lifted the boy and helped him to the tent. There was no axle grease to be had inside the compound. Mayfield saved the piece of fat meat from his own supper and gave it to the boy to rub on the places where his flesh had been broken, so that tomorrow they would not stick to his clothing and tear open again.

This was on a Tuesday night. On Wednesday, Allen Wilson worked, his face glazed and set. He worked again on Thursday. "Only he won't make it much longer," Lenier Bass said. It was noon, the men sprawled on the ground near the mess wagon. "He's either going to kill himself, or get killed."

"He's doing all right," Mayfield said. "His hands are pretty raw, but——"

"Not as bad as yours were, or a lot of newcocks'. That's not it. It's because he can't take it. He's beginning to loaf again. He's going to get more beatings. Then the more they beat him, the less he'll be able to work, and the less he's able to work,

the more they'll beat him. Or maybe he'll just come apart, kill himself or go crazy."

"No," Mayfield said, a little desperately. He wanted to help. There seemed something shameful, evil almost, about his inability to help, as if this were worse than the jokes of Frank Seton or the work or even the whipping. These had an impersonal quality. They were part of the system which there was no hope of changing—like the growing heat of summer, bearable because they were unavoidable. The only human part of the whole thing seemed to be his desire to help, and the only human failure his inability to do so. "He'll make it," he said. "He's got to."

"I told you," Bass said. "I watch 'em. I've seen 'em before like him."

Frank Seton was sitting on a wagon shaft twenty feet away. He stood up. "Let's go earn all that money Mr. Ivy's paying."

The men arose, slowly. The boy did not move. "Allen," Mayfield said.

The boy was lying face down. Perhaps he was asleep. No one could be sure. "Allen," Mayfield said again, and went and caught him under the arms and lifted him to his feet. "Come on."

Behind them Seton said, "Now that's nice of you, Mr. David." He had made a habit of calling Mayfield "Mister" in mockery of Joe Booker. "But it ain't the way I'd of done it."

That night the boy was whipped again for loafing, and again on Saturday. After that whipping Ryan Durrance called Seton to his office. "Carl Ogden's going to take Eddie's squad in the woods Monday," he started to explain, and stopped. His hands were holding the edge of the table. "I want you to put that newcock, the boy, in Carl's squad. And you work old Miami."

"You think Carl can get any work out of him?"

"You haven't been able to. At least you've had him whipped three times in a week for not working."

"Goddammit, Ryan, he's just soldiering. He don't even try."

"All right," Durrance said. "Then we don't lose anything by letting Carl have him."

He did not look at Seton, did not move his hands from the edge of the table until the guard was gone. Then he lifted them, turned palms up, trembling, and he remembered the way his father's hands would tremble hanging up the plowline on Sunday afternoon, still preaching, calling on God to use His strength against the devil that lurked inside all his sons. As if he, I, were drunk, crazy, Durrance thought. Or afraid of going crazy and this was a way to fight it. Like old Abe Pratt back in Bainbridge when he would feel a drunk coming on but fighting it as long as he could, walking the streets, talking to himself, to anybody who would listen, telling aloud the horrible things he was sure to do if he did get drunk, praying God not to let him take that first drink, and then losing like he'd known all along he was going to, breaking into a run toward the nearest bar and turning a bottle up against his mouth.

Because one of these days I'm not going to stop. I'm going to know I ought to stop and can't stop and——

CHAPTER 22

McNally, the tenant farmer, watched Laura disappear into his cabin and shook his head. "Ai God, Mr. Cason, that's some woman," he said. "I was two years on this place and never laid eyes on her. Then all at once she's out here ever' day almost, wearing clothes like a man part the time, riding a horse like a man, or driving that buggy all over the place, wanting me to clear more land for next year's cotton or corn, or plant a garden. Next thing I know she'll be out here before daylight getting me out of bed—only she done already talked my old woman into doing that herself." He spat. "When I come here I thought I was sort of squatting. I didn't know I was going to have to be sharecropping."

"You'll make more this year on shares," Cason said, "than you did last year free."

"I reckon. I aint never had fertilizer before. And God knows I aint never worked so hard before. And that cow helps, and them guinea hens you and Miss Laura brought out. Though the Lord knows them guineas can hide their nests worse'n a goddamn Easter rabbit."

Cason laughed. "You were the one who decided you wanted guineas instead of chickens. You said the chickens were too much trouble."

"Coons get 'em," McNally said. He watched his wife come out on the back porch of the cabin, get a dipper of water from a bucket on the shelf, and go back inside. "You know, first time Miss Laura asked my old woman if she could come in

the house and put on man's pants so she could go riding, I thought the old woman was gonna come down with a stroke. Now she don't think nothing of it. She'd go riding around here in pants herself, if'n she weren't scared to death of that horse."

"I've been a little worried about that horse myself."

"She handles him all right. In fact, I aint never seen a woman just like Miss Laura before. Six months ago she didn't know one end of a plow from the other end of a mule. Now—she aint hardly a farmer, but she makes noise like one."

"At least she's learning," Cason said. "She's learned more than I thought was possible."

Laura came out of the house and across the yard. She was wearing a skirt and blouse now. Her sleeves were turned back from the wrists and her hands and forearms were brown. Her face was brown. She carried her hat in her hand, her black hair piled loosely against the back of her neck.

"A woman that good looking," McNally said, his voice confidential now, "ought to learn something about something beside farming, if'n you know what I mean."

Cason did not answer. He had been happy to talk about Laura's progress as a farmer. But he did not want to discuss her as a woman. McNally was aware of the silent rebuke, but he merely grinned. "I'm old enough to be her daddy, or her granddaddy if I'd really worked at it. Besides, I reckon there aint no need to tell you she's good looking. I figure you aint just practicing law driving out here with her once and twict every week."

"I have a financial interest in the farm."

"Sure," McNally said happily. "But if you aint got no other interest, you're crazy."

Cason laughed despite himself. "At least I hope to have."

Laura joined them and Cason helped her into the buggy. While he circled it to get in on the other side she said to McNally, "Are you going to turn those potato vines tomorrow so you can get some plowing done?"

"Yes'm. At least I'm gonna try. But you done already give me five things you want done before daylight."

She grinned at him. "Get up early."

"If'n I manage to get to bed."

Cason flicked the reins on the horse's back. It was late afternoon, the sun back of the trees now but the air still filled with the heat of it. The movement of the buggy created only a small breeze. Laura pushed one hand up the back of her neck, lifting her hair so the air could brush against her skin. "You can't help but like old McNally," she said. "But I do wish he would work a little harder."

Cason turned his head to look at her. She was looking at some pasture land to the right, so he sat watching her profile, the back of her neck bent a little as she lifted the hair from it. "I expect he's working harder than he's ever worked in his life. Right now, I think, he's a little amazed at it himself, as well as at you."

"Me?"

"When you first started coming out here he thought you were just crazy. In fact, I had some doubts myself."

"And now?"

"He says you still can't tell a cotton plant from a corn stalk; but you're improving."

"And what do you say?"

"I think you can tell a cotton plant from a corn stalk, sometimes." They both laughed and Cason said, his voice serious now, "I think you are doing a wonderful job, Laura. I think you are happier than for a long time. At least you seem to be. I think you feel that you are accomplishing something that you weren't sure you could accomplish."

She looked at him, straight, and then looked away again. "I had to. For a long time Mother and I lived off Miss Clara and Cousin Doyle, or almost. I never paid any real attention then. It never seemed important. But after they were killed Cousin Elton never sent any more money. He never even came to see us. Finally Mother went to him."

Cason waited, and she said, "He loaned her some money. He made her sign a note for it."

"Against the farm?"

"I don't know. Mother doesn't either. She didn't read it. She said she'd never had to sign any notes for Miss Clara. In fact, as well as I can figure out, Miss Clara or Cousin Doyle, one of them, just put money in the bank for Mother and she never knew how much or anything else. I suppose she just figured it was her share of the Marshall money as a cousin, or for not having married Cousin Doyle, or——" Her head was turned away now. "A—a sort of advance against our share of it when I married David."

"Laura . . ." Cason said.

"So I had to accomplish something." Her voice was brusque now. "Because the farm, even with the note against it, if that's what it was, is all we have."

He said again, "Laura?"

She did not look at him. She pointed to where a half-breed Shorthorn bull grazed beyond a split-rail fence. "How much did he cost, Howard?"

"I don't remember exactly. Why?"

"Because it was your money. Everything has been, the fertilizer, the seed, the mules, the tenants' credit. Because now Mother and I are living off your money just as we used to live off Miss Clara." Her voice broke. "But I don't know what else to do! What else can I do?"

"Laura," he said again, and his own voice had changed now. It was deliberate, precise. "The cost of that bull is written down. Everything that has been spent here is written down. I told you at first that if that was the way you wanted it, that was the way it would be done. The farm will lose money this year, because it was run-down, and we were late getting started. The sale of the timber will make up part of that. Next year there will be more from the timber, and the farm itself should begin to pay. We can raise cattle on the cutover land. That bull was simply an investment as everything else here

has been. You aren't living off me any more than if you had borrowed the money from a bank."

"Would the bank have loaned me the money?"

A little of it, he thought. A very little of it. And said firmly, "Of course."

She turned then, smiling at him a bit crookedly. "You're sweet, Howard. You really are."

"I never liked sweet people."

"All right. Maybe that's the wrong word. You're good. Truly good. You are the most truly good person I have ever known."

They had left the pasture land now. There were trees on both sides the dirt road, sweetgum and bay and oak. A small stream crossed the road, and Cason stopped the horse to let it drink. It was cooler here in the gathering twilight. Overhead muscadine vines were heavy with green fruit. "When they are ripe," Cason said, "we'll come out and scoop shallow holes in the bottom of the brook. Then you shake the vines and the muscadines fall in the brook, roll down, and collect in the holes."

"I'll make you some jelly. You know"—she sounded quite surprised at this herself—"I can make good jelly. I really can. I suppose that's one of the few things I can do."

"Besides farming? You're quite a farmer."

"Who doesn't know cotton from corn? I wouldn't have had any idea where to start out here without you."

"The blind leading the blind, since I——" He stopped. He sat there looking at her, feeling the slow heavy beating of his heart. He said, "I love you, Laura. I suppose I always have loved you, even when I couldn't admit it. I must have, because I couldn't love you as much as I do now without a long running start."

She did not speak. Her eyes turned away from him but she did not move. He said, "Laura, we could save a lot of book-keeping on this farm if we just got married."

She was a long time in answering. It was so quiet they could

hear the water rippling around the horse's feet. "I can't, Howard. Not yet." She reached out and took one of his hands in both of hers. "You said a little while ago that working out here I was doing something, accomplishing something I hadn't thought I could accomplish. I do feel that way. At least that I'm trying, trying hard, honestly, for the first time in my life." She looked at him then. "If I quit now——"

"You wouldn't have to quit. You could keep on if you wished."

"Only it wouldn't be the same. It would be playing then, because nothing would depend on it. Because I would be depending on you, the way Mother and I for so long . . . Do you understand, Howard? It's something I need to do for myself."

"You haven't got over David."

"It's not that. I don't think so. Only partially. It's something I need to prove for myself."

"And when you prove it?"

"Do you really want to marry me?"

"Laura," Cason said, "I am not normally a very profane man. But goddamnit! I wouldn't have asked to marry you if I didn't want to."

"There'd be something else I'd have to tell you."

"You'd have to say, 'Yes,'" Cason said, speaking quickly, not wanting to hear anything else. "You wouldn't even have to tell me that. Just nod."

"No. It's something I'll have to tell you anyway now. Because you might not want to go on with the partnership on the farm, if you are doing it because you love me."

"I love you. I'm not going to deny that. I can't deny it. But that has nothing to do with the farm, except to make it pleasure as well as business when we ride out here together. Let's say I'm investing in your farm because it's good business. That's that, and that's all of it."

"No."

"Yes." He started the horse, shook it into a trot.

"It's about David," she said. She was still holding his right hand with both of hers and she felt his fingers tighten convulsively. "It wasn't his fault. It was mine. Mother and Miss Clara kept asking when we were going to get married. And I wanted to hurry it up too. Only David . . . Because he didn't love me. I know that now."

"David didn't love anybody but David."

"Perhaps. Only . . . I trapped him into it, Howard. That's what makes it so bad. Maybe I didn't think at the moment I was trapping him. But I know now. I did it, deliberately."

It was almost dark now. Ahead of the horse a nighthawk flew in jagged lines for a few seconds, and disappeared. Somewhere, liquid and persistent, a whippoorwill moaned the heat. Laura said, "I should have told you before I trapped you into helping me with the farm."

"Listen," Cason said, his voice once more deliberate, precise as that of a schoolteacher. "You didn't trap me into helping with your farm. Perhaps I jumped at the thing because it gave me a chance to be with you and because I was already in love with you. But if you had been a person I never saw before and didn't want to see again, the offer, from a strictly business point of view, would have been a good one. I want you to understand that." (And thought, Maybe I'm even telling the truth. It doesn't matter, as long as she believes it.)

"Then one other thing," he said, his voice still deliberate but with a tautness in it now. "I love you. Perhaps there was a time when I loved you mainly because you were pretty, and unobtainable; though even then there must have been something else; there had to be. But these last few months, driving out here with you once or twice a week, watching you, the way you have worked, the way you have ignored the little whispers you knew had to be going around the town after

David left, the gossip. I've known you all your life, Laura; so maybe I always knew, or sensed, the quality in you I've had a chance to really see of late. I'm very proud of you. I'm proud of myself that I love you. And I do. I love you. I want you to know that too."

"Thank you." She was crying now, without sound.

The horse had slowed to a walk, but Howard Cason did not notice. He would not have noticed if it were running away. He was looking at Laura and when she raised her head, the tears still brimming in her eyes, he knew that she wanted to be kissed, by him. After a long moment he put his arms around her and kissed her.

When he reached home that night Cason drove his horse into the barn and unhitched and curried and fed it. He did not want to call a servant; he didn't want to speak to anyone. When he had finished he went in the house the back way, going quickly up the stairs out of the sound of the voices of his sister and her husband and the children. In his own room he did not light the lamp but stood for a long while looking out the window. While he stood there the moon, well past the full, came up yellow and warped. "A very beautiful night," he said half aloud. "A very beautiful night."

He moved back from the window and sat on the bed. It was then his hand touched the letter his sister had put there during the afternoon. Still sitting down, he struck a match and lit the lamp. He picked up the letter, glanced at it, and felt a stab of almost physical pain. "David," he said aloud. He held the soiled envelope in both hands and after a moment his hands began to tremble. "The son of a bitch!" Cason said. It was a full minute before he tore open the envelope and began to read:

Dear Howard:

Perhaps I should write this to Cousin Elton, but he would only pass it on to you. You can show it to him as authorization for any expenses which may be necessary.

There is a new prisoner at this camp, a boy named Allen Wilson. At least that is the name he uses. He was arrested in Live Oak, Florida, on a charge of robbing a warehouse, though he claims that he was merely riding a freight train and doesn't know anything about a robbery. I'm inclined to believe him. Anyway, he is only a child and I have an idea this prison may destroy him morally if it doesn't actually kill him.

I don't know what, if anything, you can do to help. Perhaps you could arrange to pay a fine and have him released. If so, have Cousin Elton charge it to the business.

And while you are looking into this, I wish you would see what could be done to help Joe. He says he was sent up for bootlegging. Whatever he did, it was so he could be with me and help me. He says the only job he ever had was to look after me, and if he had done it properly I wouldn't be here. On that I'll make no comment, and I won't argue with any you and Cousin Elton feel inclined to make. But coming to this place with me is beyond the call of duty—even beyond the obligations of an affection I'll admit I was never worthy of. So I hope you will try to get him released.

Look after Laura.

David

"Look after Laura!" Cason said aloud. He was standing up now, the letter crushed in his hand. Look after her! he thought. So she'll still be here when he gets back, just in case he should want her, for a night or a weekend maybe before he goes on another drunk. Look after . . . He stopped. The son of a bitch, he thought.

CHAPTER 23

It was the first time Carl Ogden had taken a squad to the woods on his own. He trotted back of them through the gray morning, holding his rifle, aware of the responsibility upon him. He counted and recounted the men even while they were fastened to the squad chain. And the trusties, he thought. Just because they are trusties there aint no reason they can't run too. They got a better chance than anybody. I'll have to trust 'em some, working the line. But I got to watch 'em. And that newcock, Allen something, he thought. He knew the boy had been getting whipped for not working. Just soldiering, he thought. But I got to keep him moving. He's got to do his share. Mr. Ivy can't afford to pay the state for a man who don't work—thinking this without either irony or humor, and forgetting it again in the big awareness of his own responsibility.

It was a hot morning, without wind. The sun did seem to climb but moved forward, just above the trees. By ten o'clock the sunlight stabbed through the pines like knives. Carl let a trusty go back to the wagon for water, but as soon as the man was out of sight and behind him he was seized by a kind of panic and recalled him.

It was longleaf pine, fairly open under the great trees. Carl had the center squad of a drift of three. Sometimes, in places where there was no underbrush, he could see men from the other squads and occasionally the guards themselves. This helped him to feel less alone, but it also increased his responsibility: he had to keep his squad even with the others, moving neither too fast nor too slow.

His prisoners, with the exception of Allen Wilson, were all old timers. They knew exactly what was required of them. But they knew also they were dealing with an inexperienced guard. They wanted to find what they could get away with. Without any communication between themselves except for hidden glances, they began to work more slowly. Gradually it took a few seconds longer to streak each tree; the men would appear to trot from tree to tree, yet the time was longer. Slowly the squad began to fall behind the others.

Carl could see his squad getting behind, though he did not understand the conspiracy among the men. He did not know how to hurry them all. But he knew Allen Wilson had been accused of loafing and it was obvious the boy was the least skilled. So Carl began to yell at him, then to curse him. He was tempted to move close enough to prod him with the rifle barrel; but he knew also that he was not supposed, while armed, ever to come within reach of a prisoner. The increasing heat and his own weariness added to his sense of frustration. He picked up a stick and threw it, striking Allen in the back.

The boy felt the blow not as pain but simply as another in a vast mountain of things pressing upon him. He felt it as he did the heat that seemed to be clogging his pores, stifling him. The heat seemed inside him as well as out. It mounted in a wave through his chest into his throat and head. Behind him Carl Ogden cried, "I'm going to tell the Cap'n to give you a full crop when we get back to camp!"

Allen heard him, and felt the heat explode upward into his brain. He was not conscious of turning; he did not hear his own voice screaming, "I'm not going to be whipped again! Nobody's going to whip me again!" He did not know when he threw the hack and whirled and began to run.

Carl Ogden saw the hack, the heavy steel head glint in the sun as it spun toward him. He threw up both hands, still holding the rifle. The hack handle hit his left forearm; the spinning head flicked his cheek, cutting an inch of skin from it the way

it might have cut bark from a pine. He stumbled and fell but felt no pain. On his knees he saw Allen running and there was a moment of terror when the boy was hidden back of a tree; then he was in the open again and Carl was on his feet again. Now he felt the weight of the rifle resting smoothly in the palm of his left hand, the firm pressure of the butt against his right shoulder. He moved the barrel and saw the sights line up, the front one touching the back of the running figure but losing it as the figure stumbled. He moved the barrel again. The trigger was sleek under his finger. The recoil jolted him so there was an instant in which he did not see clearly; then he saw the figure leave its feet, dive, hang in the air for an instant, and in that same instant felt something huge and light soar upward from within himself, thinking, By God I got him! I got him! And began to run.

David Mayfield, working with Seton's squad to the right of Carl Ogden's, had heard Allen cry, "I'm not going to be whipped!" He did not get the words but only the sound of it, and for an instant the hack, poised at the height of his shoulder, did not move.

Seton too heard it, and turned. For a few moments there was no other sound that might not have been the thud of hack on tree, the regular movement of convicts through the woods. Then they saw him, running not away from the drift of men but almost parallel to it, down it, and almost directly toward Seton. He stumbled and regained his feet and ran five steps before he began to plunge forward in a long sloping dive in the same moment the whole woods were filled with the sound of the gun.

"Well I'll be goddamned," Seton said.

Carl Ogden ran up. "I got him! He ran, Frank, and I shot him!"

"What the hell did he do to you?"

"To me?" He put a hand to his face and found the blood for the first time. "He threw a hack at me. I reckon it nicked me."

"I reckon it did." And then, "You got the rest of your squad chained, or something?"

"No. He just ran. I——"

"You better get back and watch 'em before they all run."

"But what about—him?"

"I'll look after him." And to Mayfield, "Take a look at him."

The boy lay on his back. His eyes were open but glazed. Mayfield knelt beside him. He untied the rope belt, opened the trousers and shirt. The hole was to the right and below the navel. "Gut shot," Seton said. "Clean through him. Well, there won't be any need to chain him, because he aint going to run no more."

"We can put him in the wagon," Mayfield said. "Take him back to camp. Maybe they can get a doctor in time."

"A doctor aint going to do him no good."

"But we can't leave him here."

"Why not? He aint going nowhere. Now you get back on the job."

The boy moved for the first time. His eyes closed and opened again. "Some water."

"I'll get it," Mayfield said. He was still kneeling beside the boy but he stood up now.

Seton said, "You aint getting him a damn thing. You're just getting back to work."

"There's a brook over there," Mayfield said. His cap was in his hand, though he did not know when he had removed it. "I can bring him some water in this."

"And how'n hell am I going to watch you over at that slough and them men up yonder at the same time? Now get back in the line."

"I won't run. I——"

"Mr. David," Seton said, "I aint going to argue with you no more. But I'll leave you right here piled up on top of this one if you don't move, and fast."

Mayfield turned. Behind him the boy said, "Water . . ." It seemed to Mayfield that he could still hear him saying it over the sound of his own breathing, the sound of his shoes on the pine needles, the noise of the hacks ripping bark from the pines. Then he was back in his place in the drift of men. He raised his hack. He saw the bark of the pine peel away beneath the blade and the amber beads of the tree's blood.

Then it was noon. The men turned back toward where they would meet the mess wagon. They moved in a group now, the group pulled as if by a magnet toward the spot where the boy lay. As they came close Mayfield could see the sun was in his face now. His head moved; his eyes were still open though he looked at no one. "Water . . ." he said, quite distinctly.

The men moved on past.

Durrance was at the mess wagon, still on horseback. He asked, "Where is he, Frank?"

"Back there 'bout a eighth of a mile. You hear the shot?"

"No. But Daggett had to send a trusty into camp, and he told me. Is he still alive?"

"He was four minutes ago."

Mayfield said, "Captain." He had not known he was going to speak. "The boy keeps asking for water, Captain."

"Well?"

"May I take him some?"

Durrance's gaze moved slowly from Mayfield's face to Seton's and back. He said, "All right. You can show me where he is."

The water was in a barrel in the mess wagon. Mayfield filled a dipper. As he turned away Seton said loudly, "Sure. That's

the fastest way to kill a man who's been gut-shot: give him water."

Mayfield stopped. "All right," Durrance said. "Show me where he is."

They went back through the pines, Mayfield in the lead, the dipper held in both hands, Durrance behind him on the horse. Then they were in sight of the boy. The sunlight was still in his face. And Mayfield said, not turning, "Was Seton telling the truth? About the water?"

"I've heard that. I don't know."

"But if it's true——" He was beside the boy now, looking down at him. The eyes were still open. Flies buzzed around the drying blood and the wound. A fly crawled slowly up the boy's nose and across the surface of an open eye. "It doesn't matter now," Mayfield said. He let the water spill from the dipper. "It doesn't matter."

CHAPTER 24

There had been rumors the camp would be moved, but no indication of when until one Saturday morning, the men already chained in squads, one squad was detached from the others and kept in camp. Those who went to the woods were worked until noon, fed, and chained together again. Then they set out, not back toward the old camp, but southeast along a sand road.

Enod Parker trotted between Joe Booker and another Negro. He did not look at them. He was, in fact, scarcely aware of them. He did not hate Negroes, either as individuals or as a group. What he hated now was the outrageous, the incredible insult to his dignity of being treated by other white men as if with the loss of his liberty he had also lost the one thing of far more value: his whiteness and therefore his intrinsic superiority. Around the sawmills where he had lived since childhood Negroes and whites often worked at the same jobs; once he had known a Negro sawyer, the professional aristocrat of the mill, who was as good if not better at his work than any white sawyer he had ever known, a fact Parker would not only admit but state with a sense of awed surprise. Yet this, as he saw it, did not in the least alter the basic fact: a white man was superior to a nigger. There wasn't any proof needed; it wasn't anything to argue about; it was just true. God made it that way. Everybody knew it. It was the basic truth which had made a lot of his life tolerable. He had very few things to be proud of. He had never even been foreman of

a logging gang, and didn't expect to be. Moreover, he shared the common belief that neither he nor any other white man could ever hope to be as happy as every single Negro in Florida was on every Saturday night with a bottle of moonshine and the quarters loud with laughter and lush with the smell of available female flesh. That was all right too. That was the nigger's compensation for being a nigger and he (Parker) was denied it by the color of his skin. But by God he was superior!

So it was the chaingang itself he hated, the unknown "they" who had set up a system which deliberately violated the basic law of nature and chained white men to Negroes, not only to work beside them but to eat and sleep beside them. Toward Frank Seton this hatred was as concentrated as the point of a flame. Because when Seton chained him to a Negro it was not done casually but deliberately, and a joke made of it.

One of these days, Parker thought, he's going to turn his back and I'm going to get close enough to reach him with a puller or a hack or a dipping paddle. He's always yelling at me to cut that tree deeper, cut it deeper, make it bleed, you aint sawmilling now, Parker, what Mr. Ivy wants is turpentine, not lumber. Bastard wouldn't know a clabber sapling from the real stinkbug yellow pine long as they ooze out a little rosin. Make it bleed, Parker! One of these days I'll lay a puller long-side of his neck just like it was a pine and I'll make it bleed.

Lenier Bass trotted with the others through the steady, fierce, gnawing heat of the afternoon. That camp on the Suwannee, he thought. That's where we're going. And now he could see in his mind as clearly as if he were watching it again the dark head rising like that of an otter from the water, the two explosions, one to right and one to left, throwing spray into the afternoon sunlight, hear the sound of the shots and see the head going under again, the two guards on the river

bank perhaps thirty feet apart, speaking even while the noise of the shots vibrated across the river and struck the trees on the far side and echoed back, "I get first shot next time." "Well, you better make it good 'cause I aint going to miss him again," "Bet you a dollar," the dark head again, farther out but also downstream toward the shooters, and the two shots, the sounds so close together he could not tell which it was that missed and which didn't. Like they were shooting at a old fruit jar, Bass thought. Making a game of it. But at least he didn't have to come back here. At least they never whipped him for running. And I reckon water's as good as a grave, even if the grave was deep enough for Old Rats.

Ahead of them and above the pines three buzzards drew figure eights against the sky. The convict called Old Rats watched them. Sons of bitches, he thought, aiming his hatred at them as if it were a gun. Just up there waiting, watching. They aint satisfied with a dead snake or a rabbit. Or maybe they can't even tell the difference. Maybe it don't make no difference. But at least they can't dig you up like a coon or a rat can. Of course a man get left in the woods they aint even got to dig. Like that last one, that boy. Cap'n told Mr. Seton to have him buried; he didn't say dump him in no sinkhole like he did. But even if you don't try to run, if I just keep working like they tell me and die in the compound even. That old man, I didn't know his name, got shot his first night in camp, and weren't a week later there was his hand all by itself, up on top the ground where the rats dragged it, the little finger gone, the whole bone, just gone. And God knows what else. It aint right, he thought, his small, shrunken face lifted toward the buzzards. It aint right. They got no right to leave a man naked in the woods or not bury him deep enough so

the things can't get at him. Nobody's got that right. Nobody's got a right to punish a man forever.

And it was this that terrified him: not the thought of the animal teeth gnawing into what had been his flesh, but the thought of the mutilated and scattered bones. Come judgment day, he thought, how's a man going to get together again?

They saw the river before they reached the camp. It was perhaps a hundred yards wide, coffee-colored and mirror smooth between the banks of green trees. On the banks the trees grew upright and in the water they grew upside-down toward a subterranean sky, and when a bass leaped he seemed for a moment to be twins, one hanging in space above the river's mirror and one below it, superimposed upon the sunset sky.

Back of his shuffling squad of convicts Frank Seton said, "Way down upon de Swanee Riber. Dere's where you old folks gonna stay. And any of you aint old already will be by the time you get away." He laughed, delighted with his own wit. "Unless you want to try swimming that river," he said. "It's a mighty fine river for swimming."

Mayfield looked at it—and all at once he was remembering an open fire and sitting in his mother's lap while she sang "Old Folks At Home," holding him in her arms and rocking. He had few such memories; he could not remember what had led to that one instance, or how it ended, but only the brief, clear picture: the warmth of the open fire, the child curled in his mother's lap, looking up at the blond hair, the beautiful face, the soft, parted lips, and the song itself which always afterward had seemed to him more sacred than any church song. Miss Clara had a good voice, he thought. I suppose that was the reason she sang to me. And all at once he was touched

by pity, not for himself but for the mother he had never really known and who had not known him, who had suffered the labor pains of delivery but denied herself the rewards.

The river bent to the left, and ahead of them was the camp: a straggling row of shacks, the cleared compound circled by its barbed-wire fence; inside it were two pines rather than one, and a log house instead of a sleeping tent. The house was long and narrow, built of squared pine logs, with a single window just under the roof at each end.

There were already a few men inside the compound, mostly those who had been left behind at the old camp that morning. The new arrivals scarcely noticed them. Despite the heat they'd had no water since noon. Now they searched for it, finding no well but two barrels of water brought from a spring some fifty yards beyond the compound and visible across the fence. The men crowded around the barrels like cattle. They drank from their cupped hands or, in the one barrel where the water was high enough, simply by thrusting their faces into the water.

As Mayfield turned, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he saw Tom Mawson watching him from fifty feet away. On the gaunt moonshiner's face there was a look of pure animal hatred, and of something beyond that, something close to physical torture. His mouth twitched, the muscles in his throat worked convulsively. For a moment the two men stared at one another before Mawson spun and walked away.

"You see him, Mr. David?" Joe Booker was standing close behind Mayfield.

"Yes. I knew he'd been arrested, but I didn't know he was here."

"We going to have to watch him. He's mean."

"Probably. And I guess he has reason enough to hate me."

"All right. But that aint no reason to let him sneak up behind you. He'll kill you."

"How? Without everybody knowing who did it?"

"Maybe folks would know who did it and maybe they wouldn't. Maybe he don't care who knows it. He's already on the chaingang, and I never heard of nobody being hung for killing a convict. Specially——"

"When he had ample reason?" Mayfield said, remembering Clytee saying, "Tom can't have no babies," and thinking, Yet he may still have loved her, in his own way. Until I destroyed it. "No," he said. "I don't think they would ever hang him for killing me."

"Then you be careful."

"I will."

They ate supper, indistinguishable from a hundred other suppers, then lined up and marched single file into the house where they would sleep. It was a single room, long and narrow, totally without furniture except for its five-gallon can and a lantern hanging at each end. Some of the men had been here before, or in camps like it elsewhere. Without waiting these sprawled on the floor in a double line, feet together. The others, slowly, like untrained animals, lay down also. Mac, the crippled trusty, ran the center chain through the leg irons and secured it to bolts at each end of the room.

Frank Seton stood at the door watching. "You got 'em all tucked in for the night, Mac?"

"Yessir."

"All right." He moved slowly into the building. "You bastards stink worse'n a bunch of pigs. Don't notice it so much outside, but damn if you aint bad as polecats in here." He stopped, looking down at Mayfield. "How you like your new quarters, Mr. David?"

Apparently this time he wanted an answer. "It's cozy," Mayfield said.

"Aint it! And you know who you're sleeping with tonight? Tom Mawson. I reckon when you was laying up with his wife you never figured you'd have Tom too. What about it, Tom?"

There was no answer. Seton said, "It probably aint as much

fun as that little blonde. But I reckon you two'll just have to make do with one another." He turned and went back to the door.

"Put out the lanterns, Mac. With all of you cozy as Mr. David says there aint no need of wasting Mr. H. G. Ivy's kerosene."

They heard the door close and bolt. Mac turned down the lantern, limped the length of the room, and put out the other. Against one of the small, high windows moonlight showed in a pale square. There was no wind and if there had been it would not have reached the men on the floor. Heat lay on them thicker than the darkness. Mayfield could feel the sweat ooze like hot worms from all the pores of his body.

Beside him Lenier Bass said, "You know how come they transferred us here? It's so we'd have to sleep in this goddamn sweatbox. All winter we got to sleep on the ground under that tent, then when it's hotter'n hell they bring us here."

No one answered him. Half the men had already begun to snore. "Don't even tell us when we going to move, so I could bring my razor with me," Bass said. "And after I spent six months getting that goddamn piece of glass sharp enough to shave with." Then he too was asleep.

Mayfield lay on his back, awake. He could feel the sweat gather in small puddles under his shoulders and buttocks. His legs were slimy with it. And he thought of Tom Mawson lying fifteen feet away in the darkness and knew, as certainly as if he had been able to look into the other man's eyes, that he too was awake. Before today I had almost forgotten him, he thought. As if he didn't exist. As if I were the only person hurt by Clytee's death, the only person needing help. Now . . .

It was not quite a dream. He was on the soft edge of exhausted sleep, but one fragment of his mind still clung to consciousness; it was as if he dreamed and watched himself while he dreamed: Clytee with the yellow lamplight falling on her naked body, and the dead bears, and behind him the thing in

the darkness that he knew without seeing was Tom Mawson, was the death he had wanted. Only now he did not want it. Watching himself in the dream, he wanted to cry out, to warn himself, and he made an unconscious choking sound that brought him fully awake.

So I don't want to die, he thought, quite clearly now. He lay on his back in the stifling heat, in the hot gum of his own sweat. He moved his foot and felt the weight of the chain fastened to him. He thought of Tom Mawson and it did not seem strange that a man fifteen feet away might not only want to kill him but actually be plotting his murder at this moment. He had learned that death itself had no fixed value for the living. But I know I don't want to die, he thought. Not now. Not yet.

CHAPTER 25

In the mess tent on Sunday afternoon the Reverend was preaching. "You ask, 'How come?' Well, there's some folks can tell you how come some things, and other folks can say how come other things. But there aint nobody can say how come everything. Because one thing for sure: God aint made nobody with a head big enough to know it all. Now you take a cat and put him in a bag and take him ten miles out in the woods and turn him loose—and he'll be home before you do. How's he do it? He don't ask nobody the way. He aint got no road map. But you blindfold one of these here Tallahassee college professors, take him ten miles in the woods, and what'll happen to him? He won't have as much sense as that cat. Maybe he used to, but he's done forgot it. Maybe that's the way it is: everytime a man learn something new, like how to build him a train engine or one of them auto things I seen once, he forgets something else. So after a while he's done learned a lot the Lord never meant for him to know, but he's done forgot just about everything the Lord did mean for him to know. We claim we's getting smart, but maybe we's getting stupid faster'n we's getting smart. Or maybe we's just getting farther and farther away from what the Lord meant us to be, and I reckon that's the same thing."

Joe Booker sat with his left arm on the mess table, his head resting on it. He had his right hand pressed against his belly. Mayfield said, "Does it still hurt, Joe?"

"It's getting better."

"You ought to see a doctor."

"There aint no doctor here now. Before he ever gets here again I'll be all right."

"You could report sick. You could ask for one."

"Sure. And by the time he gets here tomorrow or the day after, this lump is gone and all I get is a whipping."

"I can ask for you."

"Then what we get is two whippings."

That was, Mayfield knew, very probably the truth. While he sat trying to decide what to do the crippled trusty came and touched him on the shoulder. "You got company over to the office."

"Ah . . ." Mayfield said. He stood up and put his hand on Joe Booker's shoulder. "It's going to work out, Joe."

Howard Cason stood on the front porch of the cabin and watched the convict, followed by a guard, walk toward him. Only when they were within twenty feet did he recognize Mayfield. Everything about him, Cason thought with a feeling of shock, had changed. His hair was still red, but dirty and unkempt so that it seemed to have lost some of its color. His face, beneath a stubble of red beard, was gaunt. Even his smile, as he came up the cabin steps, was changed. Once it had been like a banner in the wind. It was slower now, and softer. He said, "Hello, Howard."

"Hello, David."

They shook hands, a little stiffly. "I appreciate your coming, Howard. When I wrote I didn't think that would be necessary. But——"

"I came as quickly as I could." Cason's voice was a little thin. "I'd already written letters. I didn't know——" He stopped. The guard who had followed Mayfield stood at the bottom of the steps now, looking up at them, and Cason thought, That might be the one who killed him. They said he was young. He looked back at Mayfield. "We can talk inside." And as Mayfield hesitated, "It's all right. I have permission."

They went into the cabin. Cason closed the door and turned. They were within a foot of one another, and Mayfield, seeing Cason's face, stepped back. "I suppose I do smell a bit strong. Usually we get to bathe on Sunday and boil our uniforms. But we just came to this camp and all the tubs haven't been brought over."

"They told me this was a new camp." Then, "I wrote the sheriff's office in Live Oak soon after I got your letter. I wanted to get in touch with the parents of the boy you wrote about. And you hadn't sent me his home address."

"I never knew it."

"I got it from the sheriff. It was a small town in Illinois. His mother died a few years ago and his father remarried. Allen and his stepmother never got along. He ran away about six months ago." He paused, aware of the thinness of his own voice and that he was talking too fast. "I didn't know he would be killed, David. I couldn't know that."

"None of us could."

"An attorney in Live Oak tells me the town makes a practice of picking up hoboes and sending them to the chaingang. There may be some graft connected with it. But there is no way to prove these things. Apparently this boy was caught with a group of hoboes who had stolen goods with them. Two deputies testified against him." He kept his voice slow by effort. "Even if I had come the day I got your letter, I couldn't have got him released. Not in time."

"You did all you could. There's no need to blame yourself." And then, "The thing now is what can you do for Joe?"

"What do you want me to do?" Cason was aware once more of the thinness of his voice. "I'm the one who got him sent here. He asked me to. He said he had to go with you to look after you. He wouldn't say why, or couldn't."

"Since you are the one who brought charges against him, can't you simply retract them and have him freed?"

"I didn't bring charges. I merely turned him over to the

sheriff and told him what Joe wanted. The sheriff brought the charges. He can't retract them now. At least he won't. I talked to him yesterday."

"You'll have to do something, Howard. He's been sick a lot lately—gripping pains in his belly that come and go, but have been getting worse. A lot worse."

"Don't you have a doctor?"

"Sometimes. We also had a man die with gangrene—it set in where the leg iron rubbed him raw—before the doctor ever got here."

"I can send a doctor. Or——" He paused. He had a sensation of being lost at night in a forest in a strange land filled with strange beasts. "I suppose they would let a doctor see Joe, if I paid?"

"If the Captain approves. Ask him. And, Howard, have the doctor get here at dark, at supper time. Then Joe won't miss any work, there won't be any excuse for whipping him, no matter what the doctor finds."

"There's a doctor in Pinetree." He paused, not quite looking at Mayfield but past him to the open window. The heat in the room was stifling. Cason mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief. He could still smell the odor of the man five feet away. "David . . . What is it you want for yourself? What do you want me to do for you?"

"I want you to help Joe. I don't think there is anything you can do for me, yet."

"Nothing?" The thinness was in his voice again.

"Get a doctor for Joe."

"All right." He was at the door now, but stopped. He was breathing hard. "When I got your letter, David, I thought it was a fake. I thought your talk about that boy Allen, about Joe, was some kind of trick; that you wanted me down here to help you, to get you free. I didn't believe you were honestly trying to help someone else. I'm not sure of it now."

"I can understand that."

"It was three days before I wrote to Live Oak to ask about the boy, a week before I got an answer, before I even knew there was such a person. And I still didn't do anything. Because I wanted to forget you, wanted you to die here, disappear, anything so long as you never came back to Alabama. Because I'm in love with Laura, David. I want to marry her. And I was sure if she never saw you again, never heard of you again, she would love me eventually."

Cason still held to the door. "So I tried to pretend I never got the letter. I tried to forget it. Only I found I couldn't do it. It was too much the sort of thing you would have done: just forget it, don't think about it because it was somebody else and might interfere with your pleasure. The sort of thing you might still do. I don't know. Only I couldn't ask Laura to marry a man who would do it. But by the time I knew that, the boy was dead."

"Even if you had come right away it wouldn't have helped. He was killed too soon after I wrote."

"No. I checked the dates."

"Even if you had come, could you have done anything?"

"That's something I will never know for sure." His hand holding the door began to shake. "But it is one more reason for hating you."

Then he was outside, in the hired buggy, in the dull, smothering heat of late afternoon. The road was a narrow tunnel between the pines. Hate? he thought. Or envy? Because David was always too handsome, too rich, too happy to worry or care, with everything I ever wanted at his feet all his life and not even bothering to pick it up. Lie with her one time and never go back for what she says she forced on him that time. So it wasn't the boy I had never seen I came for, but to learn, to prove to myself that David was lying and I could take cleaner hands to Laura than his. And then the boy is dead, killed while I waited, while I didn't believe, didn't want

to believe there was such a person. And whose hands now are cleanest?

And thought, The color of a man's hands doesn't change what he wants. And I love her. I love her.

The doctor's name was Morley. He was a short, round man with gray hair and faint lines of weariness beneath his eyes. Sitting in Ryan Durrance's office, he said, "This nigger that got himself sent to the chaingang along with that fellow from Alabama, what's wrong with him?"

"Apparently he's been having belly aches," Durrance said. "Most of them seem to have come on him when he's working. The guard claims it's just soldiering. I don't know. I whipped—" He stopped. "Most of the time he works as well as any man we have."

"This lawyer asked me to come at dark when the men were back here in the camp. Said he didn't want to cause any more whippings, whether or not I found anything wrong with the fellow."

"I talked with him," Durrance said stiffly. "I gave him permission to get a doctor."

He don't like to talk about whipping, the doctor thought. I guess I wouldn't either, if I had to do it. And said, "He gave me twenty dollars cash, in advance. And told me to send him the bill for any future treatment. I wish I had more patients like him." He sighed. "I wish more of them had twenty dollars. I suppose they pay me when they can. Some of them anyway."

Durrance stood up. "I hear the men now. You can go look at him."

"All right. It's a long ride back into town. And there's a good chance Eddie Vincent'll be sitting on my front porch when I get there to tell me his wife's having a baby."

They went outside. In the summer the convicts reached

camp in the last of the daylight, without the need of torches. The doctor watched them trot past into the compound, then he and Durrance followed, "Where do you want to look at him?" Durrance asked.

There was only the mess tent and to the right of that the long, narrow log house. "I suppose in there," the doctor said.

But as they went up the steps and through the door he stopped. "My God! What——?"

"It does smell. I'll have 'em scrub it Saturday afternoon."

"You ought to have 'em burn it." The doctor backed out of the door. He looked around, pointed at the mess tent with its long wooden table. "I'll examine him on that. Can somebody get me a lantern?"

"Of course."

The mess line was forming. The doctor watched for a moment, then took the lantern the crippled convict handed him and put it on the table. He looked at the Negro standing across from him. "Are you the one who's been getting these pains in the belly?"

"Yessir."

"What kind of pains?"

"Bad ones," Joe Booker said. "They just come all at once and it gets hard all around here, like a rock almost. And after a while they go away."

"Does it hurt now?"

"No sir. Not right now."

"Let me look at it. Up here on the table. On your back." And to the trusty, "Hold that lantern where I can see." His fingers prodded the dark groin, his round, weary face impassive, thinking, Nothing I can tell, but what did I expect to tell? And thinking, That's not nigger smell. That's from the stove, the supper. It's sour. It's a wonder they don't all have belly aches, don't die of dysentery. "All right," he said. "Fasten your clothes."

He turned away, and found a white convict standing in

front of him, a large redhaired man holding his cap in his hands. "Doctor . . ."

"Yes?"

"What's wrong with him, Doctor?"

The one that killed that woman, Mawson's wife, the doctor thought. The one I examined in the jail that time. I hardly recognized him. He said, "It could be several things. It could be an intestinal inflammation of some kind. Appendix possibly. I'd have to see him when he's having an attack."

"But how——?"

Yes, the doctor thought. How? He looked at Durrance, and Durrance said, "Are you through with him?"

"Yes."

They walked together across the compound, through the gate, to where the doctor's buggy was tied. "He could be faking," the doctor said. "Or it might be real; it might be serious. If he were in a hospital, under observation, where he could be examined during an attack, it might be possible to tell the cause. You have a hospital at your headquarters, don't you?" And thought, I know what kind of hospital it'll be. Maybe he'd be better off to die in the woods.

"Yes," Durrance said. "Only I don't think Mr. Ivy is going to approve sending a man there who isn't sick. I mean, real sick."

"I know what you mean." The doctor unclipped the anchor from his horse's reins and put it in the buggy. He climbed in. "It might help to do something about that stuff they are serving for food. From the smell of it, it's enough to kill all of them."

He drove off. And Durrance stood there in the dirt road, in the gathering darkness, thinking, I don't need him to tell me how to run my camp. I serve the food sent to me. I don't buy it. But I've eaten it sometimes. He could feel anger and with it the small hard lump of doubt and shame that had been growing within him for months like the pain in Joe Booker's

belly, and which he understood as little as Joe understood the cause of his pain; thinking, I'm not responsible for the system; I'm not responsible for them being here, or the killing or stealing or whatever it was they did to get here. It's my job to watch them, to make them work. That's all. I'm not my brother's keeper.

He stopped, realizing only slowly where the phrase came from and that he'd had no intention of using it. And then saying suddenly aloud, violently, "None of them are my brothers! None of them!"

CHAPTER 26

Tom Mawson watched Mayfield with a hatred that was visceral rather than mental. In my bed, he thought. In my own bed—not seeing them there in his mind’s eye, not visualizing them at all but sensing, feeling, as though their mating struggles had somehow taken place within the dark and impotent hollows of his own body, so that even now he had only to be motionless, quiet, to feel the vibrations of those struggles still within his blood.

He was aware that several times—in the mess line at night, during the half-hour rest period at noon—Mayfield had started to speak to him and then stopped, not knowing what to say. He had assumed, as much as he paused to consider any part of this logically, that Mayfield was prompted by fear; because he knew there were grounds for fear. He planned to kill Mayfield at the first opportunity. About the results of that killing he did not ponder deeply. When he considered them at all it was to think, as Joe Booker had said, that nobody worried too much about one convict killing another, and specially not when the convict had reason. Had he thought otherwise it would not have affected him. He had brooded too long. He had missed one opportunity and would not miss another. So now late on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, at every possible moment, he worked at shaping into a knifeblade the spoon he had stolen, at honing it to a razor edge and fastening onto it a crude wooden handle. Several of the convicts had seen him working at it, but this did not matter. He had only to throw it away

later. In a prison camp no one would talk and there would be no proof of who had owned it, even if anybody cared very much.

At night, once the men were chained and the door bolted, there was no guard inside the log house. Several times Tom Mawson, ostensibly reaching for the pisscan, had measured just how far a man could move along the central chain before being stopped by the men to right and left. That and the fashioning of the knife were the two points on which he had mentally concentrated.

Now he lay on his back in the darkness and reached inside his shirt and brought out the knife. He began to whet it slowly, back and forth, upon the palm of his left hand. He tested it gently against his thumb, knowing already that it was sharp enough for its purpose, and began to whet it again. Around him the men snored, or lay like logs, or turned now and then with a faint clanking of chain. He had no desire for sleep. It did not seem to him he had slept at all since the Saturday afternoon when he had looked up and seen David Mayfield bent above the barrel of drinking water; had not slept since he heard Seton's voice saying, "I reckon Tom aint as much fun to sleep with as that pretty little blond wife of his was." And after Seton the other guards, "How 'bout it, Tom? You being as good to him as your wife was?" And the laughter on a Sunday afternoon when they were both stripped to bathe and a convict saying, "No wonder she left you, Tom. I can see which one of you give her the best time."

He moved the blade slowly, quietly, back and forth across the palm of his hand. Now and then he touched it with the ball of his thumb. There had been a time when he used a piece of rock to whet the blade against, then the sole of his shoe. Now he moved it quietly against the palm of his hand, and touched it with the ball of his thumb, and waited. He lay on his back looking up into darkness. Moonlight came in a faint, sloping line through the single window cut high above

the door to his left. It moved in a pale beam across the darkness and touched the wall, and faded without reaching the floor.

Mawson knew that David Mayfield lay on the opposite side of the chain from him and four men to his right. But it was too dark to distinguish individual bodies, and he did not want to take the chance of feeling in the darkness and possibly being mistaken. He knew the path the moonlight would take. He kept the blade moving slowly against his hand and watched the moonlight tilt slowly downward. Around the spot where it touched the wall a faint haze spread into the darkness. In a little while, Mawson thought. In just a little while. And I can sleep then.

In one of the logs there was a knot shaped vaguely like a bird in flight. When the moonlight touched it Mawson quit stroking the knife. He watched until the moonlight spread thinly over the entire knot, then bent his left leg, keeping the right one to which the chain was fastened perfectly still. He held the knife in his right hand and pushing against the floor with his left got to a sitting position. He stood up. His head and shoulders were in the moonlight, his own shadow increasing the darkness in front of him.

He stooped and felt in the darkness for the center chain. Stooping, he was no longer in the moonlight. He could see the dark bodies across from him, though he could not see the faces and did not need to. He counted. The third one would be the Negro Joe Booker, the next one Mayfield.

With his left hand Mawson moved the ring on his ankle chain along the center chain until it came in contact with that of the man to his right. He tried to move that, but it was already taut. He found the man's foot and pushed gently. Now he could move the chain rings a few more inches. He lifted his own right foot carefully and moved it as far to the right as possible. Now if he stretched out he would be within reach of Mayfield's throat.

Joe Booker made a sudden gasping sound and sat half erect.

Mawson dived. His left arm struck Booker across the chest and shoulder. The ankle chain jerked at him. He felt the knife rip into cloth and then into the board flooring. He tried to jerk it free. But Booker was on his back now, holding his arm. In the moon-touched darkness he could see Mayfield's startled face a foot from his own. He got the knife free and raised it, and both Mayfield's hands closed on his wrist. Booker's forearm was hooked across Mawson's elbow, pulling it backward. Booker said, "Get his knife, Mr. David."

The hand with the knife and the hands gripping it at the wrist were in the moonlight. Mawson could watch his own hand as if it belonged to someone else. He saw it bent slowly, steadily backward, the fingers lifting. The knife fell.

"Get it, Mr. David."

"I've got it."

"Kill him."

Mayfield did not answer. In the long dark room most of the men were still asleep, and those who were awake did not move or speak. "Kill him," Booker said again. He was breathing hard.

Mawson had ceased to struggle. He understood Booker's words, yet what he felt now was not fear but bitterness at the whole terrible frustration of his life, thinking only, I didn't even touch that nigger, didn't even touch him, and he had to wake up.

"No," Mayfield said. His voice was barely audible.

"If you don't kill him, he'll kill you some other time." And after a pause, "Give me the knife."

"No," Mayfield said again.

"I can't hold him much longer, Mr. David."

"Let him go. He can't do any more harm tonight." It was a few moments later and Mawson had gone back to his own spot when Mayfield said, "Joe, are you hurt?"

"Just one of them spells. It's what woke me up."

"Is it bad?"

"They all bad. And getting worse."

"We're going to have to do something about them."

"Sure," Joe Booker said. His breathing was harsh. "Sure."

Mayfield worked within sight of the river. More than a hundred yards wide, at this point it flowed due south. In the stream the water looked dark as ink, but if caught up in a dipper or between a man's cupped hands it was almost crystal clear, with only the faintest tint of amber. "A mighty fine river for swimming," Frank Seton had said.

Just over a hundred yards, Mayfield thought. And once a man was across it, up the bank on the far side and into the trees, he would have a fair start, a gambling chance, with Ryan Durrance and the dogs. But getting across was the first problem.

They were dipping the gum now. A flat iron dipping paddle was thrust into the box cut at the base of the tree, twisted to catch the gum, then scraped into a bucket or a wooden box dragged by handles, like a wheelbarrow without a wheel. These in turn would be emptied into barrels and the barrels loaded on wagons driven by trusties and taken to the still. Without slowing his work, dragging his box behind him, Mayfield watched a tree limb floating downstream. Fed by a number of giant springs, the current moved remarkably fast for such flat country.

He thought of Lenier Bass's story of the guards taking turns shooting at a runaway's head. Other convicts had told him stories of the bodies that no one ever bothered to identify that washed ashore downstream from any convict camp, of the stripe-clad bodies found among the floating logs at sawmills.

But once across the river a man might turn south, downstream, and strike the railroad where it crossed the river at Old Town. Or he might turn upstream, fifteen to twenty miles

either way, and reach a railroad at Pinetree. No matter which direction, he would have Ryan Durrance and the dogs to contend with. But the river would give him a start. And once he reached the railroad he might, with great luck, be out of the state within five hours.

There was still the river to cross first.

We're going to have to risk it, Mayfield thought. Joe Booker was all right between his attacks; but they were coming more frequently, getting more and more painful. "I'd have to see him when he's having an attack," the doctor had said. But the doctor did not stay at the camp.

It was September. The men worked naked to the waist against the heat and the sweat ran in streams from their bodies. Around the leg irons the sweat collected in scalding puddles and the scarred flesh beneath turned soft and inflamed. Mayfield stooped and loaded his paddle with gum and scraped it into the box, dragged it at a limping trot toward the next tree.

Twenty feet away, to his right and between him and the river, was Tom Mawson. And if I don't run, Mayfield thought, it's going to be kill or be killed. With a dipping paddle or a hack or some new knife he's made, since I can't stay awake all night every night the way he seems to do.

It occurred to him that a year ago it would have been impossible for him to consider killing a man in cold blood. He had contemplated suicide, but never murder. Now he thought about it as calmly as a gambler might have considered which cards to hold and which to discard. He felt no anger toward Mawson but rather a sympathy that sprang from understanding. Yet he knew that if they stayed on the same chaingang, then sooner or later one would be forced to kill the other. And probably I'm the one who will be killed, he thought. Unless I kill him soon and get it over with. Because he's not likely to fail his next try.

Only I couldn't do it that way, he thought, knowing this

completely, and knowing also that he had known it for a long time, knowing that inside Mawson there must be a pain as violent as any Joe Booker felt.

He awoke suddenly, throwing both arms up instinctively to ward off an attack before he realized that this time it was not Mawson. There was nothing but darkness and a steamy heat that seemed to take the oxygen from the air before it reached his lungs, and high above him the small square of lighter darkness that marked the window. Then he was aware of Joe Booker's breathing.

"Joe?" he whispered. For answer there was the sudden sound and odor of vomiting. Mayfield put out his hand. It touched the cloth of Booker's shirt. Beneath it his stomach was like a rock and, though Mayfield's touch was gentle, Booker cried out sharply. Mayfield said, "Is there anything I can do? Can I help?" And knew even as he phrased the words they were meaningless. Call? he thought. Beat the floor? Get a guard? And what then? What good would it do?

He whispered, "We are going to run tomorrow, Joe. We'll make a break for it. We'll get you to a doctor somehow."

"There aint going to be no tomorrow."

"Don't talk like that. You've had these attacks before."

"Not like this one."

"It'll pass," Mayfield said. He was still whispering. "Tomorrow you watch me. Watch the guard. I've been planning it. I told you that. I know how we can work it."

Booker did not answer. There was only the torn sound of his breathing. Somewhere down the line of men a voice said wearily, "That nigger must be dying tonight," and was quiet again.

Mayfield moved his hand carefully and put it on Booker's shoulder. He could feel the shuddering of muscles. Tomorrow,

he thought. It's got to be tomorrow. Whoever is guarding us I'll have to get close enough somehow to get my hands on him. Get the gun. Because even if Joe gets over this one (he will, he's got to!), he can't stand many more.

And I got him into this, Mayfield thought, listening to the torn breathing. He came to help me. Chances are he kept me alive those first weeks, kept me from being killed, from giving up. So I've got to get close enough somehow to the guard, get his rifle. Kill? he thought, and his mind stopped for a moment. Swap one life for another? Because one is more valuable than another? To me or to God? I don't know. I don't know how I got here, or why. It's lost like the first part of a dream, part of a long drunk with hours and days missing. Or maybe nobody knows exactly where they are, or why. What was it the Reverend said: maybe every time a man learns something he forgets something else. Because there's no room in a man's head for everything, and maybe God Himself has forgotten some of His own reasons for what He did. We all live wrapped in our own skins like cocoons and no way to reach out and touch another human being. Maybe that's the main thing we've forgotten. Or maybe it takes a chaingang, takes suffering before we learn how to break the cocoon, or even learn to want to.

Joe Booker screamed, and was quiet.

"Joe!" Mayfield said. "Joe?" His hand on Booker's shoulder began to shake. "Joe?"

"Holy Jesus," Booker said. His voice was faint but clear. "I thought I was dead sure. And now it's stopped."

"It doesn't hurt any more?"

"Just like that. It give me one last kick, and quit." He was quiet then though his breathing was still labored. "I couldn't live through another one like that. I don't even want to."

"You won't need to. Tomorrow—today now—we'll find a way."

CHAPTER 27

Even in the grayness before dawn it was hot. The air lay limp, moldering, upon the compound as if it inclosed the corpse of day rather than the fetus. In the sky one star remained, huge, white, and strangely cold looking above the gray heat. "The bear's gonna be in the woods today sure," the Reverend said, speaking to no one, and to all of them. "Maybe the Lord knows why He makes days like this 'un, but He aint bothered to tell nobody."

The men were chained in squads now. They moved sluggishly toward the compound gate. The running would start beyond the gate as each squad got the guard who would accompany it. Usually each squad had the same guard day after day, though there were occasional unexplained variations. Now Mayfield heard Seton's voice behind him as they began to trot, and thought quite calmly, If I have to kill a man, I'm glad that's the one.

He did not want to kill; he did not think that ever again he could kill by choice even a deer or a quail. Yet he could consider quite calmly, quite logically, the possible need to kill the man behind him. Because they have taught us a man's life is no more than an animal's? he thought. They have set up a whole system designed to teach that, and nobody should object if we've learned the lesson. Then he quit thinking of anything except his plan. He would want to be close to the river, if possible. And then, somehow, get the gun away from the man behind him.

Loaf, he thought. Or insult him, make him come close enough to hit me. . . . He turned his head and said in a half whisper, "How're you feeling now, Joe?"

"I feel fine."

Maybe he's well, Mayfield thought. Maybe whatever that was last night was the end and so there's no need to risk . . . And thought, No, remembering Booker saying, "I couldn't live through another one like that. I don't even want to." Besides, there was Mawson.

He was lucky about the river. They worked northward, parallel to it, with Old Rats, a trusty now, working the right line of Mayfield's squad, streaking the trees along the bank, and Mayfield himself sometimes no more than fifty yards away. The woods here had been turpented for five years, the scarred faces reaching up for ten to twelve feet, so the men used the long-handled pullers to cut the bark. Mawson worked on Mayfield's right, between him and the river. Joe Booker was to his left.

He had worked at a trot for so long it took an almost physical as well as conscious effort to slow down. Gradually the line began to move ahead of him.

Behind him and to his right, Seton said, "Mr. David, you loafing along this morning because you aint had a taste of Black Annie in a long time and you getting hungry for it?"

"I'm working hard enough," Mayfield said, and waited for Seton's reaction.

It came unpredictably, in a burst of laughter. "Maybe you think Tom ought to do your work for you—since you done his so good. How 'bout it, Tom?"

There was no answer. The men moved through a morning gone from gray to white hot. The sunlight struck through the pines like spears. Mayfield slashed the bark from a pine and walked slowly toward the next. The rest of the squad was well ahead of him now, and Seton was almost abreast.

"You already got a half crop coming," Seton said. "Maybe

you can't wait. Maybe you want to be chained to a tree while I send for the Cap'n now."

The chaining, Mayfield knew, would be done by a trusty, with no chance to get his hands on the rifle. He began to trot.

"I reckon you don't want to get too close to Tom," Seton said. "On account he might take a whack at you with that puller. Can't say I'd blame him, considering the kind of whacks you took at his wife. Hey, Tom?" He began to laugh again. "You know, I seen that little blond thing out to your house half a dozen times. But I didn't know you warn't keeping her satisfied, or I'd a helped you out myself."

"You couldn't have satisfied her," Mayfield said, his voice deliberately insulting.

"If I couldn't there ain't no one man that could." But once more Seton started to laugh. "Maybe that's what you mean. And her innocent looking as a preacher's wife in the front row on a Sunday morning."

"You should have seen her in bed on a Saturday night," Mayfield said, thinking, If I can't get him close one way, maybe another. He had quit working altogether now and turned, facing Seton. "Get a little moonshine in her and she went crazy. She used to pose for me to take pictures."

"Pictures? What kind of pictures?"

"Photographs. With a camera." He began to walk slowly toward Seton. His legs felt stiff yet he had trouble keeping them steady. He had the puller in his right hand, his left hand in his pocket. "You want to see them?"

There was an instant when Mayfield thought wildly, He's going to fall for it. I'm going to reach him. Then Seton's face changed. He jerked backward, turning sideways so the gun, still cradled across his chest, pointed at Mayfield. "You think I'm crazy? Don't come no closer, unless you wanta be left out here for the woodrats."

They were still twenty feet apart. Mayfield took another step, and saw Seton's finger circle the trigger. "If'n you anx-

ious to get killed this morning," Seton said, "I'm the man can satisfy you."

"I just wanted to show you the pictures."

"I don't believe you got no pictures."

"Ask Tom. That's what she told him she was coming to my camp for: said I was paying her to be an artist's model. Only it got kind of hard to keep my mind on art."

"Well, I'll be damned! Tom——"

The sound Mawson made was more moan than scream. He drove straight at Mayfield, swinging the steel-headed, razor-sharp puller with both hands. Watching Seton, Mayfield heard the other man before he saw him, saw him just in time to duck so that the puller head missed by a fraction, the handle striking him a glancing blow high on the head. The earth seemed to sway, wrapped suddenly in gray mist. Somehow he was on hands and knees, and saw Mawson above him, the puller raised. Mayfield dived, and again it was the handle that struck him, this time across the back. His shoulder hit Mawson, knocking him off balance.

Again he was on hands and knees. He saw Joe Booker, twenty feet away but standing motionless, covered by Seton's rifle. "Leave 'em alone," Seton said. "There aint no need to break up a good fight."

Mawson's advance was slower now. He held the puller in both hands, not to swing again like a baseball bat but to use the way it was made, to cut. Mayfield, on his feet again, began to back away, circling. Mawson followed. His lips were working. "I ought to kilt you before," he said softly. "Aint nobody going to scare me out of it this time."

The words had no meaning to Mayfield. He was backing away, half turned toward Seton. "Stop him, before I have to kill or——" His voice checked.

Enod Parker was standing behind the guard. For a moment he merely stood there, looking at Seton and holding his puller exactly as if he were about to place it against a tree. He's

going to kill him! Mayfield thought, and made no sound. Still backing away from Mawson he saw Parker lean forward (the work done more by the weight of the body than by the hands and arms, the smooth, powerful stroke of a trained turpentine worker) and put the puller alongside Frank Seton's neck, and pull. The blade passed through flesh and bone as it might have through the bark of a tree.

Seton swayed backward, then straight again as the puller went free. His head dropped at a grotesque angle to the right. Then he fell, the rifle still held across his chest in both arms, his finger still on the trigger. When he hit the ground the rifle fired one time. Standing over him, Enod Parker reached out with the puller, turning it to use the other side of the blade just as he would have done to make the left streak on a pine, and struck again. The head came free, and Parker kicked it once in the face. "I hope they make you set at the table and eat with niggers in hell," he said.

Mawson did not see Parker. He had forgotten the guard, forgotten everything but Mayfield backing slowly away from him, and his desire to kill. When the bullet from Seton's rifle struck him low in the back he did not even feel it; he staggered without being conscious of it, took two steps, and fell. He did not know why he fell or even ponder on it at the moment, thinking only of getting up and reaching Mayfield—and then, realizing in slow, outraged disbelief that his legs would not move. He lay with his legs flat on the ground, both hands still clutching the puller, and pushed against the earth so that his head and shoulders were raised at a forty-five-degree angle, and began to curse. "Son of a bitch!" he cried, seeing Mayfield running now, Joe Booker running, Parker, the black-and-white clad figures fleeing like rabbits among

the pines. "Son of a bitch!" he cried again; and then in despair, "Shoot him. Mr. Seton! Shoot him!"

Old Rats worked close along the bank of the river. On the right flank of the squad, he was the farthest from a guard. When he realized that he was getting ahead of the men to his left, he turned his head without stopping work and looked back, just in time to see Parker place the puller against Seton's neck. Rats did not move or make a sound. Then men were running toward him and past him, and still he did not move. He was watching Seton, thinking, They'll take him into town, bury him in the church graveyard, in a box. But if he was a convict . . .

Abruptly he turned and began to run, wildly, toward the river. And as abruptly stopped again. Behind him he could hear men shouting, the other guards calling Seton's name. They're too close! he thought in panic. They'll see me! Now he began to run back toward where Seton lay, arms raised, until once more he was in sight of the headless body of the guard and of Tom Mawson, raised snakelike beside it, still cursing. But there were no other guards and Rats began to sway back and forth; his feet began to jerk rapidly up and down on the same spot; he started to run in small, comic circles. And then once more he was running toward the river.

He was within thirty feet of it when the bullet struck him. It was almost as if he had expected it, known already the instant in which it would strike. He slid for ten feet along the pine needles and got slowly to his hands and knees and began to crawl. Blood came from his mouth. It spilled on his hand and his hand slipped and he went flat again. But not here! he thought. I aint going to die here for them goddamn rats to get! His fingers clawed at the earth; his head and shoulders lifted.

The river was five feet away. In it the trees grew upside down

with the sky blue and white and infinite beyond them. I'm gonna make it, he thought. I got to make it! And then his hands slipped and he lay face down against the earth.

Carl Ogden was the next guard on Seton's left. When he heard the shot he called Seton's name and got no answer, then heard a voice he did not recognize crying, "Son of a bitch! Shoot him!" Through the trees to his right Carl could see the Reverend, the trusty who worked Seton's left flank, standing perfectly still, his hands raised; beyond the Reverend there was a flicker of black and white, but it vanished behind a clump of scrub palmetto before he could move his rifle.

It was almost as if he knew exactly what had happened, and exactly what he must do. He had thought about it day after day, following the men through the woods, knowing that sooner or later it would have to happen in one squad or another. Now he would not make the mistake he had made the day he shot that Yankee kid. It had been only luck some of his men had not escaped that time. Now he began to shout at his men, herding them swiftly to the left and the squad on that side, shouting at one of his trusties to get the squad chain.

Hurriedly his squad and the one on its left combined; another closed in from still farther left, the two guards calling to Carl to ask what had happened. "Frank Seton," he shouted, and, "Watch my men!" and began to run, past the motionless Reverend and directly to where Seton and Mawson lay and past them, still running, thinking, No, it just looked that way. And then, seeing the convict fleeing ahead of him and almost to the river, he was not thinking at all, just feeling now; the steady, strained, lifting calm in which he quit running and steadied himself and raised the rifle, pushing it hard against his shoulder, moving the barrel with his left hand, his right forefinger curling tighter and tighter around the trigger. Then

the jolt against his shoulder and his own voice crying, "I got him!"

Now he was running again. He saw the convict get to hands and knees and begin to crawl toward the river, and fall again. Then the boy was on the bank and saw men swimming, downstream from him and more than halfway to the far bank. He fired, and knew instantly he had missed. Aim! he thought, forcing calmness on himself. Take time. Aim. He moved the rifle barrel, holding his breath, bringing the sights steady against the dark wet head.

The head went under before he could fire. The others were gone now too. But he did not move, keeping the rifle at his shoulder, thinking, They got to come up again. They can't make it around that bend under water. They got to come up. And in a kind of panic, They got to! Nobody can stay under that long—and saw the shadow rising beneath the water, and the water ripple back as a man's head broke the surface. He fired, fired again, and there was nothing more to shoot at.

He was running again. A small slough joined the river here. He floundered through it. There was a thicket of alder bushes and small bay trees and wild hydrangea. Then he was on the river bank again, below the bend.

The river was empty. He waited for five minutes and saw nothing. Anyway, he thought, I got two of 'em.

CHAPTER 28

Mayfield did not know how many of the prisoners ran, only that he and Joe Booker reached the river abreast. Then they were swimming and there were others in the river, though he did not know how many or who. The current tugged him downstream; his shoes were heavy, but he did not dare take them off. Once on the far bank and running again, the shoes would be necessary.

He glanced back at Booker. "You all right, Joe?"

"Yeah."

We're going to make it, Mayfield thought, watching the bank move upstream and slowly closer. We're going to make it without even being shot at. Then the water exploded in a small geyser beside his face; there was the sound of the bullet on water, the ricochet, the sound of the gun, and in the same instant the second geyser.

It seemed to take an eternity to dive; he was aware of how his back and buttocks came out of the water as his head went down. Using a breast stroke, he kept trying to go deeper even as he strained downstream and toward the far bank. Almost immediately his lungs began to ache. He was winded from the run and hard swimming. His chest and throat began to expand with the air in them. He let it out little by little and thought suddenly of the way bubbles would mark his trail on the surface and tried to hold the air. But his lungs would take it no longer and he shot upward to the surface.

This time there was no geyser, only the vicious whine of

the ricochet a few inches from his ear, and as he went under again the sound of the shot.

When he surfaced again the bank was only a few feet away. He splashed to it, clawed his way up it, diving flat into the bushes and rolling so he could look back at the river. Thirty feet downstream Enod Parker was splashing ashore. Directly in front of him a dark stain swirled in the water, and was gone. It might have been cloud-shadow; it might have been blood. There was no sign of Joe Booker.

"Joel" Mayfield called. He realized he had rounded the bend in the river while under water, which was the reason there had been no shots fired while he and Parker climbed the bank. But if Joe was still upstream of the bend, or if the second shots . . . No! he thought. No! as if by willing it he could prevent what might have already happened.

Joe Booker's head emerged from the water almost directly in front of him. Booker came floundering up the bank, sprawling into the bushes. Then they were both running, bent far over, until they were a hundred yards from the river and lying face down in a thicket of wax myrtle bushes.

"You all right, Mr. David?"

"Just winded. You?"

"Scared. I thought that first time he shot he hit you."

"I thought he hit you the second."

"I was still under water. There was somebody back of me, only I never looked back to see who it was. What we do now?"

"Move," Mayfield said.

As well as he had been able to learn, they were about equally distant from New Town and a railroad to the south, and from Pinetree and another railroad to the north. Now he had decided to go north for several reasons. There was a doctor in Pinetree, in case Joe had another attack. There might not be one in New Town. Also, Enod Parker had apparently turned south, and the chances of escape were better if they went in different directions. Who else might have escaped and which

way they had run he had no way of knowing. But there were only two bloodhounds in the camp at present and these were worked as a team. So there was at least a fifty-fifty chance the dogs might be set on Parker's trail rather than his and Joe's.

They traveled at the slow trot at which (for how long now? Mayfield thought, and could not remember; time had lost its meaning) they had gone back and forth to work. The country here was gently rolling, forested with virgin pine. The giant trees lifted straight against the sky, the earth beneath them was coated thick with needles and there was little underbrush. For over an hour they moved steadily, seeing nothing except once the sudden flight of a deer ahead of them. The sun was high now, lashing almost straight down between the trees.

"Mr. David," Booker said, "That pain's starting again." But he was still trotting as he spoke.

Mayfield slowed to a walk. "Take it easy for a few minutes. Maybe it'll go away."

"It aint as bad as last night. Just——" He began to vomit, still walking, his head and shoulders thrust forward.

Mayfield caught his arm. "Wait! Rest a minute."

Booker kept going. When he could speak he said, "There aint no time to rest. There was a guard killed back yonder, remember?"

"We didn't kill him."

"Maybe they know that, and maybe they don't. They catch up with us now there's liable to be more shooting than talking."

"Probably." He watched Booker anxiously, wanting to hurry and wanting to go slow, wanting by sheer force of will to stall off the pain he could see reflected in Booker's face. He said, "Put your arm over my shoulder and I can sort of half carry you until you feel better."

But when they tried this Booker pulled away. "That just makes it worse. I'll get along all right."

Abruptly the country changed. Here there were only the

lopped-off tops and limbs of trees, brown and dying, an occasional sapling, many of them broken where trees had fallen on them, and a ragged forest of stumps. "They's sawmilling somewhere around here," Booker said. He began to vomit again. The vomit was thin and yellowish-brown in color. Booker began to stagger; he went down on his hands and knees. But when the vomiting finally passed he straightened again. "Come on."

Another mile and the land changed again. The stumps and fallen limbs thinned. Ahead of them they could see cleared land, a field of what had probably been spring corn but was brown now though the fodder had not been pulled.

"We better circle that," Mayfield said, and they slanted toward the left and a line of trees dark against the sky.

"Mr. David."

"You feeling better?"

"I aint going to make it."

"Sure you are."

"You better go on."

"Don't be silly. Those trees are probably along the river, or a slough. Anyway, there'll be water. When we get there we'll rest awhile."

"There aint no time to rest."

"If they were close behind us, we'd hear the dogs. They haven't even started after us yet."

"Them dogs don't make noise when they're trailing. You won't know nothing about 'em until you see 'em, and Cap'n Durrance with 'em."

They were past the corn now. Off to the right, beyond more cleared land, there was a cabin with an umbrella chinaberry tree in the yard and beyond that a small barn. Once more Booker and Mayfield turned more left, keeping away from the cleared land.

The vomiting started again. When he could speak Booker said, "I can't go no farther, Mr. David."

"Here," Mayfield said. He lifted Booker as he might have a child. The man cried out once, and was quiet except for the sound of his breathing, the grinding of his teeth. Then they were at the edge of what appeared to be a small swamp; there were cypress and bay trees and the ground was marshy underfoot. Mayfield kept going. There were bushes now, a thin stream of water trickling off to the left and the nearby river.

"All right," Mayfield said. He knelt and put Booker on the ground. "We'll stay here until this attack passes over."

"It aint going to pass."

"Of course it is. You've had them before. You said last night that attack wasn't going to pass. But after it you felt fine."

"That's the truth. I never had nothing hurt like that—and then all at once it quit."

"This will quit too. After it does, we ought to be in Pine-tree in three or four hours. Then we'll get a freight train and be in Georgia tomorrow."

"Maybe," Booker said. "Maybe——" He started to vomit again, the fluid acid and foul smelling. And watching him Mayfield could feel the pain within his own body, feel it tear at his own nerve ends and at something still deeper, at the source of love itself: the need of all mankind to help one another, and his vast inability to do so. I want to pray, Mayfield thought. And how can I pray to something I don't even believe in? Because I can't believe like the Reverend in a God who has either forgotten the reasons for His own actions or refuses to let man understand them. I just know I want to help Joe, and can't.

Ryan Durrance was halfway between the camp and the men in the woods when he heard the shot. Immediately he put his horse to a trot, leaning forward in the saddle, listening.

The shot had come from somewhere near the right end of the drift, near the river. If it was somebody running, that one shot must have stopped him, he thought; and a minute later heard another shot, then two more, a long pause and two more.

There were no more shots. Ahead of him, through the scarred trees, Durrance saw two men standing. The boy Carl Ogden and a guard named Briggs. At this point there was no sign of prisoners. Then he saw two men on the ground and thought exactly as Carl Ogden had done, No, it just looks that way from here.

He stopped his horse and dismounted and moved forward again, leading the horse. The horse snorted and held back, and Durrance jerked it violently. Then he was close enough so there was no longer any doubting. Frank Seton's body lay on its back, a puller with a bloodstained blade across the chest. The head was five feet away. "My God!" Durrance said, and swallowed twice before he could ask what happened.

It was Briggs who answered. When he had finished Durrance said, "You don't know who——?" He made a gesture toward Seton's body.

"It was like that when we got here."

"How many got away?"

"The old Reverend didn't run. And Mawson there." Briggs nodded. "Carl shot Old Rats just before he reached the river."

"Was he the only one you hit?"

"I don't know," the boy said. He was carefully avoiding looking at either Seton's head or body. "I think I hit one in the river. I aint sure. I think——"

"Who?"

"I don't know. I just seen the back of a head."

"So at least four got away without being hit," Durrance said. "Maybe five." He turned to Briggs. "Take my horse and ride back into camp, in a hurry. Tell Moore to bring the dogs. Then you ride on into town and tell Jim Lavender what happened. Tell him some of them may be heading that way and to watch

the railroad tracks and the trains. Have him send a telegram to Dave Strode down at New Town. And you send a telegram to headquarters and have them send all the dogs they've got just as fast as they can."

"By the time we get any dogs from headquarters, them convicts'll be in Georgia."

"Maybe, if you don't hurry."

"I'll hurry all right."

Durrance looked at the boy. "You didn't shoot Tom?"

"He—they both were like that when I got here."

"Frank must have shot him before——" He stopped. "Is Tom dead?"

"I don't think so."

Circling Seton's body, Durrance went to where the convict lay and knelt beside him. "Tom . . ."

Mawson raised his head. "Son of a bitch," he said.

"Who killed Frank?"

"Son of a bitch," Mawson said. His hands dug at the ground; his shoulders lifted. He was not looking at Durrance but off toward the river. "I ought to kilt him when I kilt Clytee. I ought to kilt him then. Only that nigger shouting and all them people scared me."

"When you killed her? Did you kill her?"

"I ought to kilt him at the same time."

"Who killed Frank? Did you kill him?" Mawson did not answer. His head and shoulders began to sway back and forth. "Tom," Durrance said. "Listen to me. Who killed Frank Seton?"

Mawson's head turned slowly. He looked at Durrance as if he were seeing him, hearing him, for the first time. A kind of smile twisted his lips. "Mayfield," he said distinctly. "Son of a bitch. Mayfield killed him." His head fell forward. His hands slid slowly forward through the pine needles, the fingers clutched, and went lax.

Durrance stood up. "Carl . . ."

"Yessir."

"Where's Old Rats?"

"Over there."

"Show me."

They walked toward the river bank. "There," the boy said, and Durrance went forward and knelt beside the body, and stood up again. "When you were shooting at the men in the river, where were you?"

"Right there. They was out in the middle, almost down to the bend." After a moment he said, "I ran around the bend to look, but I didn't see nobody else."

"Probably climbed the bank just the other side," Durrance said. He turned and walked downstream, wading the slough where the boy had, and back to the bank again. Right over there, he thought. Somewhere along there. The dogs should pick up the trail in a hurry. He was standing on the west bank of the river; the bend was to the east. Current holds to this bank, he thought, and started downstream again.

It was fifty yards farther on that he stopped. "Carl."

"Yessir."

"Look here."

The boy hesitated. He no longer felt exultant as he had fifteen minutes before. The change had begun shortly after he realized the other prisoners had escaped and there would be no more shooting. He had walked back up the river bank to look at the body of Old Rats and, almost suddenly, had found himself hesitant to do so. He had never seen the body of Allen Wilson except for one excited moment before he had to run back to guard the rest of his squad. Now when he looked at Old Rats a strange dryness started in his throat. There was no trophy here to brag about later. A crazy old man, he thought. And thought angrily, He ought to had more sense than to run. He ought to had more sense.

Briggs had called him then. He walked back to where Seton and Mawson lay and tried hard not to look at either of them.

When he did he had a terrible fear he was going to be sick and make a fool of himself. Then the Captain had arrived. He'd had to go once more to look at Old Rats. And now Durrance was saying, "Look here."

He knew instinctively what he was going to see, and he did not want to look. He was afraid; but at the same time he was even more afraid of fear itself; he was terrified of the thing in him which he had no way of knowing might be something more than weakness. He braced himself like the boy who has been thrown by a horse and knows he must either get up and ride immediately or never ride again: either he must look where Durrance pointed and accept what was there, or sooner or later he would have to give up this job and seek another way of life.

He stepped forward. Below the edge of the bank a tangle of oak roots thrust out into the water. Caught in them, just below the surface, was a hand. The current had swung the body around, rolling it face upward, pushing it against other roots so that the face itself was only a few inches below the surface. The long, drooping jowls, the sad mouth, the little parrot eyes, seemed to flow and change shape like something seen in a wrinkled mirror.

"It's Bass," the boy said. His voice shook. "I didn't know who it was. It was like shooting a deer or something. I didn't know who——"

"It had to be somebody," Durrance said.

"I reckon." He took a long breath. "Goddamn convict," he said. And suddenly he grinned at Durrance. "I told you I hit one of 'em! I knowed I couldn't miss four shots in a row."

Durrance turned away without answering.

It was an hour before Moore arrived with the dogs. He asked, "You got anything particular to start 'em on, Cap'n?"

"On the handle of that puller."

Moore looked, and swallowed. "I reckon nobody been using it but the man who——" He swallowed again.

"Every prisoner has his own puller," Durrance said. "Each one has to keep his own sharp."

"It was sharp all right. You hold King, Cap'n." He gave the leash of one dog to Durrance. Holding the other dog by the collar, he led it to where the puller still lay across Seton's body. He put the dog's nose close to the handle. "All right, Annie. It aint but a hour or two old, you ought not to have no trouble." With his free hand he transferred the dog's leash from the collar to the harness, then released his grip on the collar, holding only the end of the leash now. "Go find him, Annie."

The dog began to walk in small circles, then to move first a few feet to the right, then to the left. Abruptly she began to trot, pulling Moore after her. In a straight line they headed for the river bank.

Durrance followed, leading his horse and the other dog. At the river bank Moore said, "Here's where he dived in. How's your swimming, Cap'n?"

"If I can't make it, the horse can."

"All right."

When they reached the far bank Durrance held King until the other dog found the trail again. After that Moore held both leashes, Durrance riding a few steps behind. They had gone less than a mile when they came to a marsh where the tracks of one man showed plainly. "Wait," Durrance said.

"What's wrong?"

"We're trailing only one man."

"It's the one used that puller."

"Tom said that was Mayfield. Mayfield and that nigger are going to be together."

"Annie don't call 'em by name," Moore said. "But she's trailing whoever had his hands on that puller."

"Maybe there was more than one. Maybe—" And thought, What difference does it make? I have a dying man's word he didn't kill the woman he claimed to kill; and the same dying

man's word he did kill Frank Seton. And the word of a dog that can't talk and so can't lie but can't testify either that he didn't, or maybe he didn't, since I can't be sure yet who I'm trailing. And it's not my job anyway to decide who did what, who is guilty of what. My job is to get them back. And whip them, he thought. That's my job too, even if it never yet kept one from running when he had the chance.

CHAPTER 29

The sun was below the pines, but there was still daylight, hot and steamy. Mayfield sat on the ground beside Booker, occasionally brushing mosquitoes and flies from his face with a spray of oak leaves. There was no need to ask how he felt. The pain was written in his face, the drawn lips and closed eyes.

"Joe," Mayfield said. There was no answer. "Joe, can you hear me?"

The man's eyes opened slowly. "Why aint you gone? They can't be forever getting them dogs on the trail."

"I'm going to leave you for a few minutes, Joe. I'm going to get a wagon and take you to a doctor."

"Where you going to get a wagon?"

"I'll get one. A wagon, a buggy, something. Here." He put the twig of oak leaves in Booker's hand and stood up. "I won't be long."

"No," Booker said. "You aint got——"

Mayfield was gone. There were still traces of sunset in the sky and in the east an almost-full moon drifted just above the trees. A quarter mile away Mayfield could see the dark blur of the barn and cabin he had noticed earlier, a single lighted window. He made no attempt at concealment, moving at a steady trot across the open land. They'll have to have a mule, a horse, something, he thought. And dogs? There probably wasn't a farmhouse within two hundred miles without dogs. So what chance would he have of hitching up a horse or mule and getting it out of the barn without being discovered?

Only that doesn't matter now, he thought. It's getting Joe to the doctor. I should have come sooner, but I kept thinking he'd get better. He's never had an attack like this one that lasted on and on.

He was within a hundred feet of the barn when the dog began to bark. From inside the cabin someone spoke to it, and it was quiet. Mayfield did not stop. He reached the barn and was inside, standing motionless, aware of darkness and the smells of hay and manure and animal sweat, then of cracks in the barn wall through which faint beads of moonlight trickled, and then of the wagon he had known would be here, had to be here, and beyond that the mule looking over the stall gate toward him. "Ah . . ." he said, and turned as if he had known exactly where the harness would be, and gathered it and went to the stall. "Whoa now," he said softly, and opened the gate and slipped the bit in the mule's mouth.

He had to lead the mule half outside the barn in order to back it into the wagon shafts. It went easily, accustomed by long habit. When Mayfield had it hitched; he climbed into the wagon and shook the lines. The mule moved wearily forward, out of the barn into moonlight.

"Whoa now," a voice said, and the mule stopped.

The woman stood to one side of the barn door, holding a shotgun in both hands. In the moonlight Mayfield could tell nothing particularly about her: a shapeless dress, hair partially done up and partially down her back, a face that might have belonged to half the women who lived on one-mule farms within five hundred miles of here. Close behind her stood another woman, younger, holding a baby in her arms.

"You one of them convicts run away," the older woman said conversationally. "Well, that aint none of my business. But that there mule is. So get out of that wagon, and get going on foot."

"You'll get the mule back," Mayfield said. "I'll pay for it, and the wagon."

"Sure. When you hold up another train or something, you'll send me the money. Now get down."

"I'll have the money sent——" He stopped, realizing how silly any claims he might make would sound. He said, "There's a man down there at the slough who's sick. Maybe he's dying. He will die if I don't get him to a doctor."

"Get down," the woman said. "I'm going to give you just half a minute to get out of that wagon and out of this yard, before I pull this trigger. I got buckshot in here, and I won't miss neither."

"He's in pain," Mayfield said. "He's been lying there all afternoon. I'm going to take him to the doctor in Pinetree. Once I get him there you can get your wagon back from the sheriff."

"You got about one quarter of a minute now."

"He's my friend," Mayfield said. "I'm going to take him to the doctor, or you'll have to kill me." He shook the reins. "Get up," he said, and the mule began to move.

"Whoa!" the woman said. The mule stopped again. The woman said, "I can blow your head clean off with this gun."

"I know."

"And you still aim to make me do it? Are you crazy?"

The woman with the baby spoke for the first time. "What's wrong with your friend?"

"I don't know. Something in his stomach. I can't watch him suffer any longer." He looked at the woman with the gun. "If you shoot, you'll be killing two of us."

He shook the reins again. The mule started and again the woman said, "Whoa . . ." and the mule stopped. "His stomach?" the woman said, and without turning her head, "Sara, aint there some of the baby's paregoric in the house?"

"Yes'm."

"Get it."

The younger woman ran into the cabin and was back again.

She held the bottle up to Mayfield. "There aint much. But sometimes it helps when the baby hurts."

"If I have a chance, I'll see that you get more." He looked down at both of them for a moment. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you." The mule moved wearily away from the barn. Automatically it tried to follow the faintly rutted road past the cabin and he had to jerk to turn it across the pasture toward the slough. Once he looked back and saw the women standing motionless in the open moonlight. Maybe I do believe in prayer, he thought.

It was well after midnight, the almost-full moon sloping steeply toward the west. The wagon passed a house, then another, and Mayfield thought, This must be the town, the edge of it. Ahead on the left he saw a lighted window only partially visible beyond camellia bushes in the yard. Mayfield stopped the wagon and turned. "Joe . . ."

The answer was a kind of sigh.

"We're in the town," Mayfield said. "Now I've got to find out where the doctor lives. But we'll be there soon." He got out of the wagon and followed the walk between the camellias. As he reached the front steps the light inside the house went out. Mayfield crossed the porch and knocked.

Rose Durrance had got up to put the baby on the pot. Afterward she blew out the lamp and stood for a moment listening, wondering if she had heard a horse. Maybe it's Ryan, she thought. Maybe they've already caught . . .

Someone knocked at the front door.

For a moment she stood very still, imagining a dozen things it might be. Jim Briggs had brought her the news of the escape and of Frank Seton's death, and now Ryan should be off somewhere with the dogs, unless . . . She moved slowly to-

ward the door, and with one hand touching it asked, "Who is it?"

A man's voice said, "I'm trying to find the doctor. Can you tell me where he lives?"

"The doctor?" And thought, Ryan's been hurt! He . . . And told herself immediately that was silly. Anyone with Ryan, anyone who lived around here would know where to find the doctor. "It's about a half mile. It's kind of hard to explain. He doesn't live on the main street."

"Can't you tell me how to get there? A man's dying."

"You go——" But it was hard to give directions through a closed door. "Wait!" she said, and went swiftly into the bedroom and found her dress and pulled it on over her nightgown. Then she went back to the front door again and opened it. "Do you know where Mr. Alex Mead lives? Or Mr.——"

She stopped. The man standing on the porch at the edge of the moonlight and shadow was naked to the waist. Below that he wore the striped and ragged trousers of a convict. But he himself had apparently forgotten. He said, "I'm a stranger. I don't know anyone in the town."

"It—it's down that way. You go——" Even in the moonlight she could tell his beard and hair were red; but it seemed to her she had known this already, from the moment she heard his voice. It's the one named Mayfield, she thought. The one who killed that Mawson girl. The one Ryan talks about all the time.

The man said, "Isn't there someone here can show me? I have a friend in the wagon out there who may be dying."

"I've got three children. I can't leave."

"Could one of them go with me?"

"The oldest is only nine. I——" She stopped. "Why did you come here?"

"There was a light in your window."

"I didn't mean this house. The town. Do you know what town this is?"

She was standing in shadow, but abruptly he sensed the way she was staring at him. He made a gesture with one hand toward his striped trousers. "Yes. But it doesn't matter, as long as there is a doctor. That's all I want now. I'm not trying to run now."

He never did, she thought. That's what Ryan couldn't understand, couldn't forgive. "Wait," she said and turned swiftly back into the house and through the moon-touched dimness to the room where the children slept. She touched the oldest boy on the shoulder. "Ryan . . ."

He moved sleepily, and opened his eyes. "There's a man outside has been hurt," Rose said. "I've got to show them where Dr. Morley lives. I'll be right back."

"All right, Momma." He was asleep again and she thought, He didn't even hear me. But if little Ellie, if Donnie should wake up . . . She was back in her own bedroom now, opening a dresser drawer, feeling in the darkness until she found the small, blunt-nosed pistol Ryan had put there years before when he took the job as town marshal. Carrying it, she went into the kitchen and found the stack of diapers she had ironed earlier that night and wrapped one about her hand and the gun. Then she was on the front porch again. "I'll show you where the doctor lives."

"Thank you."

When they reached the wagon she saw that the man in it was a Negro. But I knew that already, she thought, and felt Mayfield touch her arm and jerked away before she realized that he was merely, instinctively, trying to help her into the wagon. "I can get in," she said.

He climbed up beside her. "Straight on?"

"Yes."

She sat with the diaper-wrapped gun resting in her lap and pointed at the man beside her, though he did not seem to notice, interested only in hurrying the mule. And it seemed to her she was caught in a dream of wearing a nightgown with

an unfastened dress pulled over it and her blond hair hanging loose down her back, of riding along a dark dream-road which she had traveled almost every day for years but which was changed now and strange, leading to something she could not yet foresee but must discover.

"You turn left here," she said. "It's not far now."

"It was kind of you to show me."

She did not answer. A minute later she said, "That's the house. There's a driveway alongside it."

The doctor wore a cotton nightgown and carried a lantern. Holding it high enough to look down into the wagon, he said, "He's the same one I examined out at the camp?"

"Yessir."

He put his hand on Booker's stomach and saw the reflex cringing of the flesh. "How long's he been like this?"

"Since this morning. Yesterday morning now."

"Ah. . . . Can you carry him?"

"Yessir."

"Wait until I get some lamps lit, then bring him in. Around those back steps to the office."

"What is it, Doctor?"

"Appendix, I think." Or guess, he thought. Maybe some day we'll be able to know. But at least I'm not McDowell. I'm not the first doctor to open an abdomen. Or lose a patient either. He went back into the house, the nightgown swishing around his knees. He was aware of weariness and lack of sleep, thinking, Probably already ruptured, if that's what it is. Peritonitis. Too late probably. At least I can send the bill to that Alabama lawyer. And thinking too, I should have known when I saw him before. Only what good would it have done? What chance was there of getting a convict away from H. G. Ivy while he was still able to work? Though I could have forced

it maybe. And it could have turned out not to be an appendix, not to be anything. He was all right that night I saw him. I couldn't know.

He removed an armful of litter: books, two pans, a can of smoking tobacco, from the high, handmade bench that served as an operating table. "Put him on there," he said to Mayfield. "I'll be back in a minute."

His wife was already awake. He said, "I'm going to need help."

She sat up slowly, saying for perhaps the thousandth time, "Always in the middle of the night. Doesn't anybody get sick except at night?"

He watched her grope, still half asleep, and find a bathrobe. "It's a convict," he said. "Two of them. One brought in the other." And as she turned, "Now don't get excited. It's that Negro I went out to the camp to see—and the white man, Mayfield, the one who killed the moonshiner's wife about eight months ago."

"How—?"

"Probably in that break yesterday. It doesn't matter. All they want from us now is an operation—and with a chance it'll be paid for even, for a change."

He went back to his office. "All right," he said to Mayfield. "You can wait in the parlor." And then, looking at him again, "Go in the kitchen and see what you can find to eat. There's a well out in the backyard with a can of milk hung in it."

"Thank you. I'm not hungry. I'll drive the lady to her house, and then come back."

"Mrs. Durrance?"

"Durrance?" Mayfield said. "Captain Durrance?"

They looked at one another. "You didn't know?" the doctor asked.

"There was a light in her house. I stopped to ask how to find you. She was kind enough to show me."

"I see. Well——" His wife came in then and he turned and began to tell her brusquely what he needed.

Rose Durrance was still in the wagon. Mayfield said, "I'll drive you home now, Mrs. Durrance." She looked quickly at him and he said, "The doctor told me. But I didn't know when I stopped at your house."

She did not move and he said, "You won't need the gun. I told you, I'm not running now."

He climbed up beside her and shook the mule into motion. They moved on past the house into the barnyard where he could turn around, then past the house again, past the lighted window where the doctor's plump shadow showed black against the curtain, and on into the tree-shrouded street. In the west the moon was almost down now. Mayfield said, "It was very brave of you, Mrs. Durrance, and very kind, to show me to the doctor's house."

"I had to go with you," she said, as if only now understanding her reason. "I recognized you. I'd never seen you; but I've heard Ryan talk about you, talk and talk. So I had to go, to ask you what it is that's happening to him out there, what you are doing to him."

He turned to stare at her. "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Durrance. I've scarcely ever spoken to the Captain." His mouth twisted slightly. "Convicts don't talk much with the Captain, you know."

"Yes." Yet she was still turned toward him as if seeking help. "Ryan's always been a good man. A good religious man. Only after he started to work for Mr. Ivy he began to change. I can't explain it exactly. It was like some of the things happened out there, some of the evil things, got stuck to him."

They came out of the side street into the one which led past Durrance's home and on into the ruined forest and the convict camp. "Then they sent you out there," Rose Durrance said. "Ryan said it was like you wanted to be sent. He couldn't understand why you admitted killing that woman when—I don't

think he ever really believed you did it. He said once it was almost as if you had been sent out there for a purpose."

"What purpose? By whom?"

"I don't know." She moved, looking straight ahead now into the night. "I've begged Ryan to quit that job ever since he took it. But he can't quit. It's like he was trapped in some way, in some trap of the devil's. And since you went there, it's like he knew that—like he was trapped in something horrible and fighting against it and losing, and knowing he was losing."

The pain in her voice was almost tangible. Mayfield wanted to say something that might help, and he could think of nothing. He was too tired to think. Rose Durrance said, "This is my house here."

He stopped the wagon and got down to help her. The moon was gone now. In the predawn darkness a chuck-will's-widow began to complain against the heat. Mayfield said, "Thank you again, Mrs. Durrance."

Her head was turned slightly to one side. She said, "It's Ryan's horse." Then he too could hear it, moving at a slow trot along the dirt road somewhere ahead of them.

She looked at Mayfield and he could sense more than see her expression. He said, "It's all right. I told you I wasn't running now." Then, "You can tell him I forced you to show me the way to the doctor's."

CHAPTER 30

The sounds came nearer, the horse appearing gradually as a concentration of the darkness itself. Now it was almost on them, and the woman said, "Ryan."

The horse stopped. Durrance's voice said, "Rose? Is that you?"

"Yes." She moved toward him.

"Who's that with you?"

"It's the convict, Mayfield. I went with him to show him Dr. Morley's house."

"You—what?"

"He stopped here to ask the way. He had a sick man with him."

"Are you all right, Rose?"

"Of course. Of course, Ryan. We took the man to the doctor, then he brought me home. We heard your horse and waited."

Durrance moved his horse three steps forward, close alongside the wagon and sat staring across it at Mayfield. Behind him Rose Durrance said, "I was changing the baby's pants, Ryan. He saw the light in the window and stopped. He didn't know it was your home."

"No," Durrance said. "I suppose he couldn't have known that." And again, "Are you all right?"

"I told you."

"Go in the house then."

She said, "He didn't hurt me, Ryan. He didn't touch me."

"I believe you."

She turned away from them, into the darkness among the camellias. And Durrance said, "Where is that nigger? Is he alive?"

"The doctor was going to operate when I left to bring Mrs. Durrance home. I'd like to go back there and wait, find out."

"All right. It's where I was going anyway, to look for you."

He moved his horse and once more Mayfield turned the wagon. They went east again along the wide, unpaved street between the dark houses, Durrance riding beside the wagon. Sourceless, insistent, the chuck-will's-widow was still crying. "When you claimed you had killed Clytee Mawson and got sent to that camp," Durrance said, "why did you do it?"

"I'm not sure. I was drunk, in a state of shock."

"No. It was more than that. I need to know. What were you looking for?"

"Myself, possibly. Or a chance to get away from the self I had known. Atonement. Or at least to go where I couldn't hurt anyone else." He paused. "I didn't know Joe would persuade them to send him with me."

On the dirt road the horse's hoofs made a liquid sound. "But you?" Durrance said. "Did you really think you killed that woman?"

"I was the cause."

"Did you know who killed her. Who did you think killed her?"

Mayfield turned then to look at him through the darkness, and Durrance said, "Tom murdered her. He told me yesterday, before he died."

"I didn't know. I thought she—I had given her a gun." And then, "I was still the cause."

"Sure," Durrance said. His voice was suddenly angry. "If that makes you happy."

Once more Mayfield turned the wagon from the main street; the lights of the doctor's house showed up ahead of

them. He stopped the mule in the driveway; Durrance tied his horse to the tailgate and they went together into the house. There was the nauseating odor of chloroform.

"We found where he was sick," Durrance said. "Then the dogs trailed you up to the house where you got the wagon. They lost the trail there; the weather was too hot for good tracking. But I knew that if that nigger was so sick you needed a wagon to carry him, then you would be heading for a doctor."

"Didn't the women tell you?"

"They wouldn't even admit they had seen you." The scar at the corner of Durrance's mouth began to twitch. "Because they hate convict guards," he said. "People are afraid of convicts, like they would be of wild animals. But they hate guards. Even Rose . . ."

The doctor had come into the room. He stood for a moment, wiping his hands on the bloodstained nightgown, looking first at Durrance, then at Mayfield. "Peritonitis," he said. "It must have ruptured awhile back."

"You mean——?"

"There was nothing I could do. He would probably have lived a few more hours if you hadn't brought him here, if I hadn't operated. But not in comfort." And then because he was still a doctor, "Did he have an attack recently where the pain ended suddenly?"

"Last night. Rather, night before last now. Time gets mixed."

"If I'd had him then, maybe . . ." He shrugged wearily. "Do I get in touch with that lawyer in Alabama?"

"Please," Mayfield said, "if you will." He stood there, aware chiefly of exhaustion, of the dull ache of his muscles, the tightness of his chest and throat. It was a numbness, like that he had felt during the first weeks at the convict camp when he had passed beyond the ability to suffer. Then he felt the wetness on his face and knew he was crying.

He turned away and Durrance said, "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

It was daylight now. They got into the wagon together, Durrance's horse following, tied to the tailgate. Mayfield asked, "Where do we go now?"

"Back to the main street."

The wagon creaked out of the drive. Ahead of them a night-hawk flew in crazy zigzag lines through the gray light; the chuck-will's-widow was silent now. And Durrance said, "There was something else Tom Mawson told me before he died. He told me you killed Frank."

Mayfield was slow in understanding; the words seemed to sink into his consciousness like oil through rust, loosening something inside him. Slowly he turned on the wagon seat to face Durrance. "If he told you that, he lied!"

"I know. It was Parker. We caught him at New Town. I just wanted to know if you wanted to take the blame for that too. If you wanted to go back to camp."

"No," Mayfield said. "Whatever I was after at first, I don't want to go back. Maybe if there was something I could do there, some way I could help . . . There isn't." He looked at Durrance, smiling faintly. "I hope there isn't. Because even if there was—I'm not a saint, Captain."

"And me?" Durrance asked. His voice went thin. "Do I have to go back because there is something I can do, or try to do anyway? Because it's my job? Because if I quit Mr. Ivy will hire another captain, another Frank Seton maybe? Do I have to go back, knowing that one of these days I'll start whipping a man and Black Annie will get me like dope and—" He stopped, breathing like a man who has run a long way. "What do I do, Mr. David?"

Mayfield sat with his head bent, looking down at his hands holding the reins: the broken nails, the calloused and gnarled and filthy fingers. "A child is supposed to know right from wrong," he said finally. "Only sometimes things get more complicated as you get older. It's not so easy. Probably most people

do what they think is right. Even Frank Seton, maybe. The problem is to know. And every man has to solve it in his own way."

"All right," Durrance said. And then, "Turn left. You can get some sleep and food at the jail. You'll have to stay there a few days anyway until things get straightened out legally."

CHAPTER 31

Elton Marshall's office was the same one he had occupied twenty-one years before when his Uncle Albert, David Mayfield's grandfather, had retired leaving Elton as manager but not owner. Albert's larger office, at the end of the hall, had been reserved for the day when Doyle Mayfield, his son-in-law, would want to take over active operation of the business. That day never came, but even after Albert's death, and later Doyle's death and David's imprisonment, Elton Marshall had continued in the same office where he had worked now for over forty years. It was little more than a cubbyhole, bare except for the desk and two chairs and the small safe in the corner. When Howard Cason entered he closed the door behind him but did not sit down. He said, "I've just got another telegram from Florida, Mr. Marshall."

"Well?"

"You told me to have Joe Booker's body returned—as cheaply as possible."

"It doesn't do Joe any good to spend money on him at this point."

"Probably not. But there seems to have been a change. Joe's body will arrive on the train this afternoon. And David is coming with it."

Elton Marshall's lips opened with a faint popping sound, and closed again. The nostrils flared. "David's body?"

"No. David has been freed. On bond, possibly. Possibly released. I don't know the details."

"Freed?" Marshall said. "Of a murder charge? In less than one year?"

"Possibly they found he was not guilty."

"He confessed! You heard him. He——" Again his lips made the faint popping sound that was like a snarl. "Who was your telegram from?"

"David. He wants me to notify Joe's mother and arrange for the funeral. Beyond that he said only he would explain when he got here."

"And what else is he going to want to do when he gets here?"

They looked at one another. "I don't know," Cason said. "I told you he had changed. He isn't the same man."

There were a half-dozen mortgages stacked on Elton Marshall's desk. He picked them up and riffled the pages with his thumb and put them down again. Still looking at them, he said, "What about Laura? This may change some of your plans there, eh?"

"It may."

"It might change some of mine also." He raised his eyes then. "You heard him admit the murder, Howard. There must be some way. If not sent back to Florida, then declared incompetent." He paused. "Or——" he said, and left the one word suspended.

"The idea has occurred to me," Cason said. His voice had a faintly choked sound and he turned from Marshall's desk to the window, looking down across the street onto the courthouse lawn and the Confederate monument. "I would be a liar if I denied it. I keep remembering that I never had the Marshall money to play with. I never had David's good looks, his charm. I—I never had Laura. But every man must have something to hold onto and take pride in. He can't live without it. So I always told myself that what I had was my own personal honor." He turned, said, "It's too late to change that

now, Mr. Marshall," and went out, closing the door behind him.

It was hot with the still, oven heat of late summer. He walked steadily, looking cool in the white suit and dark bow tie and straw hat, but with the sweat already starting back of his knees and beneath his arms and around his forehead. At his sister's home he sat on the back steps while a Negro boy brought his buggy. Late-blooming wisteria hung in clusters like grapes from the eaves, and he was aware of the smell, the sound of bees, thinking, Maybe I ought to get one of those automobiles. Save walking to town in this heat, and you don't have to hitch it when you get there.

He drove across town to the Negro section, the Negro undertaker. "I don't know yet when his mother will want the funeral."

"In this kind of weather, Mr. Cason . . ."

"Yes. You could have it this afternoon, if that is what she wants?"

"It'd be best, yessir."

"All right. I'm going out there now."

The Mayfield house was two miles beyond the town, a quarter of a mile from the road at the crest of a long slope: white and two and a half stories with Doric columns, built in 1875 when the South was more conscious of how it was supposed to have looked in ante-bellum days than it had ever been before the war. Cason drove past but stopped without going on to the servants' quarters when he saw Virginia on the back porch.

She waited for him to get out of the buggy and anchor the horse. He stood at the foot of the steps in the sunlight, holding his hat in his hands now. "I had another telegram from Florida."

"Yessir?"

"Joe's body will get here on the train this afternoon. I've already spoken to Reverend Daggett. He says that, if you wish, he could have all the arrangements made for this afternoon."

"Yessir. I reckon we better."

"Do you want me to send a carriage for you?"

"We got a carriage here. I figure Mr. David won't mind none if we use it."

"Of course not." And then, "Mr. David is coming home too. He's bringing the body."

She took a long breath. "Home? To stay?"

"I think so. I don't know for sure."

"You tell him his house is ready. I kept it ready. I always thought he'd be coming back. I thought they'd both——"

"Is there anything else I can do? Anybody you want me to tell?"

"Sam and Jennie and Dover out to the quarters. I reckon they can tell folks. Unless you wants to tell Miss Laura?"

"I'll tell her," he said.

So that afternoon he and Laura Raymond stood in the hot shade at the end of the station platform, smelling the odors of fresh-cut pine and creosote, and watched the train come to a stop. Up the track from them the baggage car opened; the casket was handed out; the Reverend Daggett and his helper loaded it into the hearse. Then Mayfield got down. He spoke to the Reverend Daggett and turned and walked toward the station.

Cason was watching Laura's face now. He saw the way her breath stopped for a moment, and started again, the slow flush in her cheeks. He saw her step out of the shade into the sunlight and move along the tracks toward Mayfield, saw them stop a few feet apart and Laura hold out both hands and Mayfield take them. They stood like that for a moment before Laura said, "Welcome home, David."

"Thank you. I'm more glad to be here than I would have thought possible a year ago."

"You are here to stay?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. Howard didn't know, from your telegram."

"Where is he?"

"Here." She turned and saw for the first time he had not followed her down the tracks. But he came forward now, and he and Mayfield shook hands.

"The funeral is to be right away," Cason said. "I suppose you want to go?"

"Of course."

They rode in the carriage belonging to Cason's brother-in-law. In the small pineboard church they sat together on the front row left, with Joe Booker's mother and brothers and sisters on the front row across the aisle and a dozen other mourners, women mostly, behind them. Cason did not listen to the sermon. He heard the singing as he might have listened to surf, rhythm without words. He was not thinking; only watching Laura's face and waiting for what he knew he would find there sooner or later.

Then it was over, the trip to the graveyard complete, and they were in the carriage again. "Virginia just told me," Mayfield said, "she has kept the house open. I can go there."

"Now?"

"If you don't mind driving me."

"Of course not."

The horses walked softly through the late afternoon heat. Cotton grew on both sides of the road here, shoulder high, and Mayfield looked toward it as he talked, telling them of Booker's illness, the prison break, and finally of Tom Mawson's admission he had killed his wife.

"And now?" Cason asked. Ahead of them the Mayfield house showed white and beautiful against the sky.

"Now . . . I want to work. I want to sort out what I have learned and decide what best to do with it. What best to do with myself. I suppose that is the central problem every man has: how to use himself best, though with some it's more complicated than with others." He looked at them, smiling the slow, changed smile that Cason had first noticed while stand-

ing on the top step of the shack at the convict camp. "I think now I'll find my way. I had considered going back to Florida; but we have the same things here, the same institutions, the same kind of people. I think I'll find my way here."

The horses had turned into the driveway now. And Mayfield said, "You know, Howard, all my life I have envied you."

Cason stared at him. "You envied me?"

"Because you always seemed to know how to use yourself, to know what was right and to be able to do it. Because you never seemed lost. I have always thought you were the best man, the truest man, in the best sense of the word, I have ever known."

Cason flushed, unable to answer. The horses stopped under the porte-cochere and Mayfield got down from the carriage. It was then Laura said, "David, there is something I want to tell you. Howard and I are going to be married. It hasn't been publicly announced yet." She began to laugh. "In fact, Howard is just now finding out. But we are, very soon. And I wanted to tell you because I knew you would be happy for us."

"I am," Mayfield said. "I truly am."

He stood there while Cason turned the carriage and drove away. He waved, and saw them wave back. Then he went into the house. He was still smiling.

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